

Could I get you to comment on
this one as well?

TEMPORAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN AFRICAN BELIEF AND IDEOLOGY

by

Jack Nelson

Dr. L. Barrett
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In delineating the temporal consciousness of the people belonging to a traditional African culture, perhaps, the most subtle difficulty is that of overcoming the assumption of a normative concept of time. Augustine's well known quandary, of knowing what time is until asked to explain it, remains a most formidable experience. Only in struggling with the problem on this level are we able to perceive the symbolic nature of temporal consciousness serving to synthesize a peoples' ethos by providing a cosmological construct. But further, we can uncover the ideological function embedded in a peoples' temporal consciousness. What becomes interesting then, is the manner in which this temporal consciousness is altered in a changing society, experiencing the breakdown and reconstruction of cultural superstructures, with varied efforts being made toward preserving a continuity with traditional cosmologies while adapting in the wake of encroaching socio-economic changes. The results, in African societies, have ranged from an unintegrated synthesis of separate assumptions of time to an almost pathological consciousness of time precipitated by the encounter between these different ways of experiencing time; as is manifested in millenarian movements.

That there is a normative concept of time, in western societies, is very questionable, even though people speak of the, "Western notion of linear time" with past, present and future dimensions. Actually, no one theory of time has prevailed in the West.

Whether, Time is an entity, some sui generis monstrous object or pureform, in the Platonic tradition, in which world history is situated; or whether it is contingent on changeⁿ, as in the Aristotilian tradition, remains in dispute (Newton-Smith 1980: 9,13,51). Though there is some link between time and change, it never has been established that time is a causal element (Newton-Smith 1980:38). Although one might be justified in speaking of a certain level of negotiated agreement in the West, in the use of a linear concept of time, as the standard topology of time, including a metrication system, to provide uniform correspondence, the ontological status of such notions remains speculative. Newton-Smith's recent study of time (1980:238-9) concludes with a qualified "theoretical framework" concept of time where the system does not have real existence and "assertions about time only provide a framework within which to organize assertions about things in time". Further, he questions whether it is "possible to have a theory of time that does not make room for the mysterious and the ineffable".

Rather than speaking of the ontological status of time, it might prove more fruitful to investigate the integrative function of the concept of time, as a fund^damental cosmological element; or the ideological nature of a prevailing notion of time. Charles Sherover (1981:323) suggests leaving behind the question "What is time?" and asking, "How does time appear to work in the temporal structure of human experience in animating our

fundamental concerns and the meanings we find in life?¹ Hans Mol (1982), has advanced a study in this direction contrasting temporal notions in modern industrial societies with those of traditional societies. In industrial societies the temporal system is "objectified" and given a transcendental status to serve as an ordering principle.² Further, he writes (1982:321-22),

The invisability and vagueness of a transcendental system of meaning allows for the absorption of a large variety of experiences without stability being put in jeopardy...By making a meaning system less dependent on the here (space) and now (time) and allowing for the incorporation of change in the here and now, it can prevent the collapse of the precarious wholeness of self and society. The notion of time therefore aids the process of relativation of the here and now... The success of the notion of time is related to the positive contribution it makes to the cohesion of the variety of systems which form the blueprint of existence from the social scientific point of view.

By contrast, Mol (1982:323), speaks of traditional societies having a temporal consciousness "that seems to be at least originally related to two different needs: a) the adaptive need... for order and a continuous system of meaning reinforcing that order and b) the need for delineation and structure of the here and now to discipline disorder, to safe guard the security of rules and regulations and to keep the arbitrary at bay." The peoples of traditional societies, were able to achieve the fulfillment of these needs by a "fusion of transient time and timeless eternity into one single reality" in ritual enactment and mythical dramatization (Mol 1982:321).³

Mol is in a better position to assess Western notions than traditional experiences of time, but nevertheless, his suggestion is worth checking out with evidence from Africa. We will seek to demonstrate that this fusion of time and timeless eternity can best be recognized in African consciousness by an analysis of the relation between time and social space. ^{Recognizing that,} there may have been more change occurring in pre-contact Africa than has been ^{here-to-fore} allowed for, at issue is the question of whether African temporal consciousness is somehow mythological and therefore a reflexion of structural categories; or whether the temporal consciousness does not reflect to some extent the socio-economic and even the political situation that occurs in a given mode of production, and thus serves an ideological function.

This essay will proceed with a brief ^msummary of Mbiti's description of time, with some evaluation of his model, and then pursue an understanding of the relationship between space and time in traditional African thought. The integration of space and time is recognizable in a basic "event consciousness" which tends to unify spacial and temporal consciousness as events are both tensed and situated. It is also apparent in the relation between social space and successive development, over generations of time, of a lineage system and age set structures. Following an examination of the implications of this, we will conclude with some evaluation of the change that is occurring and the effects it is having on African consciousness.

Though grand schemes of Pan-African philosophy are somewhat passé now, as studies are becoming increasingly contextualized

and historical, Mbiti's articulation of the African's experience of time, as a key to understanding African thought and life, remains a helpful model and at the center of the discussion of the subject. The success of his treatment of the subject is due as much to the clarity and concisemess of his presentation of the data as to his careful research. His view remains somewhat paradigmatic and can be briefly summarized.

Though temporal consciousness is implicit in traditional African thought it is not an articulated concept, with no evidence of any metrication systems. Duration is experienced with the passing of events. This fundamental event consciousness shapes a two dimension^{al} awareness of time, in which events occurred in the past and occur in the present. As future events have not yet occurred there is no developed consciousness of any future dimension of time. Mbiti bases his conclusions mostly on linguistic evidence and mythical and legendary materials. There is thus, an "indefinite 'past' which is the terminous of all phenomena and events, and which is dominated by the myth; and an intensely active 'present' in which the individual or community is most conscious of his (its) existence." (Mbiti 1971:30). In Mbiti's work, he utilizes African designations for this past and present experience speaking of the ^{indefinite past} as zamani and the present as sasa; (tene and mituki are the respective Kikamba terms Mbiti employs in the 1971 work). Further, he speaks of sasa as constituting a micro-time; the now period, including the recent past and near future. Zamani is a macro-

time, over-lapping and absorbing sasa. Time moves backwards as sasa becomes absorbed in zamani. Thus, events gravitate toward zamani, the "ocean of time", where they are beyond the memory of living people but may be preserved in myths and legends. Zamani is, therefore, a mythical time. As zamani is a great storehouse of past happenings it connotes a mythical richness and has a tremendous gravitational influence on life in sasa (Mbiti 1970:22-23).

Mbiti further advances that there is virtually no future dimension of time, beyond a few years, in African thinking. Though it is taken for granted that the natural rhythms will continue indefinitely, there is no linguistic verb tenses to speak of the distant future, nor are there any myths about the future. A teleological consciousness is absent in traditional African thought, according to Mbiti, with the final state being in the past, zamani, rather than envisioned in the future. The consequence of this is an absence of any "belief in progress" (Mbiti 1970:30-31).

Mbiti's study has stirred up considerable controversy, especially his contention that traditional African thought lacks a future temporal dimension, and though his position has been defended by others (i.e. J. Parratt 1977) it has also come under attack. Francis Gillies (1980) argues, using the evidence Mbiti presents, that Mbiti assumes too much about a Western view of time and that, therefore, his formulation of the notion of the absence of a future dimension of time in

See notes
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African thought is the result of his use of an assumed Western ontology and linear topology of time as being normative.

Mbiti can speak of the absence of a future dimension of time in African thought only by employing a Western model that, as we indicated at the beginning of this essay, remains tenuous in many respects. Gillies' criticism, on this point, may be unfair, however, as he seems to be forgetting that Mbiti, in writing in a European language for a Euro-american audience, is necessarily translating and thus having to select the best possible equivalence at an appropriate communication load level. An interesting experiment would be for Mbiti to present his findings in Swahili, utilizing only native African categories, in an effort to articulate an African concept of time.

But Gillies' (1981:21) criticism includes other points. He feels that Mbiti, in speaking of an assumption, on the part of Africans, that the rhythm of nature will continue perpetually, is indicating an African affirmation of the future. Gillies argues, that in the West, affirmation of the future is based on this same chronological experience and not on an ontological concept. That Westerners envision a more extended future is only a result of their having been able to rise above a mere subsistence livelihood; as this future-directed consciousness is a fundamental biological category. Further, Gillies (1981:24) questions whether African kingdoms, such as existed in Ethiopia, Ghana and Zimbabwe among others, could have emerged had Africans not been able to imagine a better

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future. Such an ideological use of temporal consciousness is the same as what is found in the West. These questions need to be researched further before a revised theory of Traditional African temporal consciousness can be formulated.

Mention was made earlier of the fundamental event consciousness in African thought; a point that Mbiti and others have developed considerably. This leads also to a linkage of space and time as events are both tensed and situated. Traditional African temporal references are made by naming an event that corresponds to the time in question, as there is no metrication system to utilize in referring to an abstract point in time. Thus, Evans-Pritchard (1979:101) speaks of the "Cattle-Clock" among the Nuer as times of day are differentiated by activities involving the herds at respective times of the day. Parallel examples are found among agricultural peoples, where they may note the position of the sun in referring to a time of day (Beidelman 1963:12). Less temporal differentiation is made for the night as there is less activity occurring in this "empty" time. Bohannon (1953:255) speaks of the Tiv people making temporal distinctions by reference to social events. A five day market cycle is a prominent feature of Nigerian society and days are referred to by the names of the marketplace at which a market is held on that day in the cycle. As market locales vary in different parts of the country, the corresponding names of the days also change. Similarly, seasons of the year are named for their significance in the agricultural cycle or the migratory pattern of pastoralists. Typical rain or

wind patterns or the agricultural activities that accompany their occurrence are events utilized for temporal references. As the dry season entails less agricultural activity there is, correspondingly, less temporal differentiation of this period.

A year is not comprised of a certain number of days but is referred to only in regard to the repetition of the seasonal cycle and accompanying agricultural or pastoral activities.⁴ (Beidelman 1963:14; Mbiti 1970:26).

References to the past are made by the mention of a well known event that occurred at the time being spoken of, or at least some common point of experience between those involved in the conversation. To what extent these kinds of temporal differentiations can be generalized, in application to most of Africa, is a question that would require further research. But these descriptions do offer a good outline of possibilities one can expect to find; as do other patterns we will turn our attention to now.

Further evidence of a unity of space and time in the consciousness of Africans is given in the form of linguistic evidence. Mbiti (1971:30) makes mention of similar words used in Kikamba to indicate both spacial and temporal categories. Kagame (1976:92) speaks of the Lugala using the same expressions for time and space. In a similar vein, Beidelman (1963:12) noted that the Daguru refer to the "long ago" (katali) with a similar word as is used to refer to the "far away" (kutali). Kagame (1976:92) has elaborated on this parallel noting that,

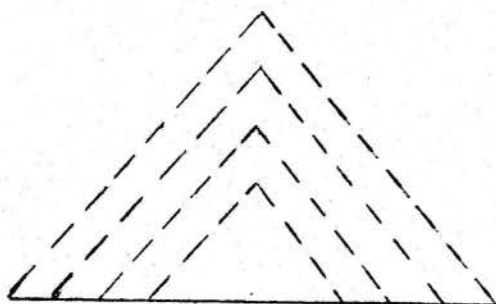
though the Bantu in everyday life make the distinction between locating and duration, "at the underlying levels of thought, which can be inferred from the structure of locative terms, the two entities merge into a single notion which is that of localization". A related interesting observation, made by Kagame (1976:104), correlating a day as an event with duration, is that in six of eleven languages, for which sufficient evidence is available, the same word is used for "yesterday" as is used for "tomorrow". Further, the same word expresses the "day before yesterday" and the "day after tomorrow". In Kagame's own native language, Kinyarwanda, this pattern extends to the third day.

If we ask what it is that has shaped this kind of temporal consciousness it seems that the best evidence comes from the link between time and social space. Mbiti (1970:35) gives a clue to this when he notes the ties that Africans have to their ancestral lands. The land in which their forefathers lie buried merges the collective past with the spacial territory and undergirds their present sense of well-being.

Evans-Pritchard (1979:94) in his studies among the Nuer perceived in these people a temporal consciousness on two levels. The first is mainly a reflection of their relations to the environment which Evans-Pritchard called "oecological time". Included here was the natural climatic rhythms and the accompanying pastoral and agricultural activities that the annual cycle determines. Secondly, there is a "structural time" reflecting the relations among the social structure. Evans-Pritchard goes

on to say that, "In a sense all time is structural since it is a conceptualization of collateral, co-ordinated, or co-operative activities. Time concepts...become more determined by structural interrelations, being no longer a reflection of man's dependence on nature, but a reflection of the interaction of social groups."

To comprehend this consciousness, the nature of the lineage system involving agnatic descent among the Nuer is necessary. This system preserves the fundamental relations of production in a communal society such as the Nuer maintain. Evans-Prichard found among the Nuer a division of age-sets (roughly ten years) with, five or six age-sets in existence at all times. The hereditary distance between contemporary age-sets represents a temporal consciousness of past lineage relations. Evans-Prichard (1979:106) represented this structure with a helpful diagram, combining lineage structure with temporal consciousness as it is reflected in the structural distance between groups of people.



"The base line of the triangle represents a given group of agnates and the dotted lines represent their ghostly agnatic forebears, running from this base to a point in lineage structure, the common ancestor of every member of the group"

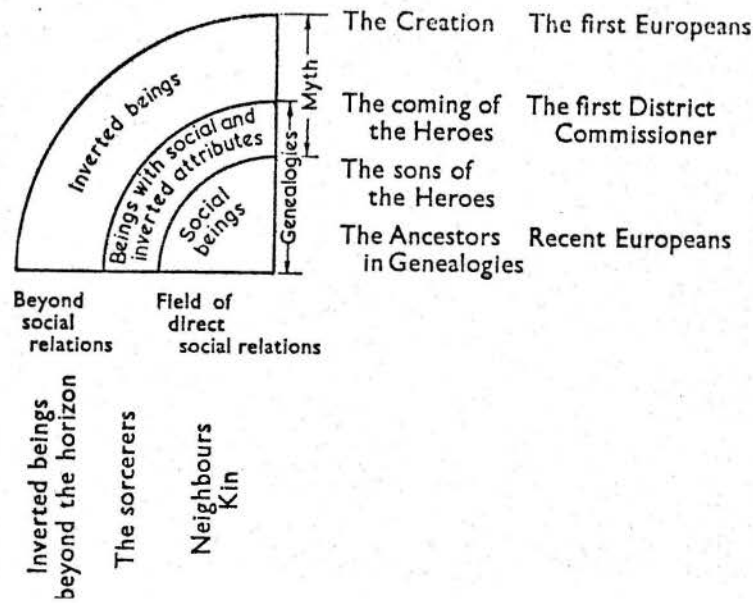
As there is never more than five or six age sets in existence at one time, the depth and range of lineage does not change unless a breach occurs. The temporal period represented in this structure, from the eldest living member, to the youngest age-set,

cannot be much more than fifty years and it is this period that represents a historical time for the Nuer. Beyond this is a plane of tradition and myth.

This fundamental relation between social-space and temporal consciousness has been documented among other African peoples. Beidelman (1963:12) reports that the Kagurer, "rarely trace their descent beyond three generations of the dead...(and that) passage of time is meaningful only in terms of helping to explain the alteration in various social relations and allegiances... Except for the problem of speaking about various economic and social obligations to geneological kin, Kaguru have no occasion to discuss the past with any precision at all". Similarly, Bohannon (1953:259) reports that for the Tiv, in the geneologies, the generations structure a consciousness of social space. An increase in time correlates with an increase in space. This spacial structure dominates the temporal consciousness even as it extends beyond the historical period remembered by contemporaries. "Events and incidents in legends and myths are told in explanation of social process not as history" (Bohannon 1953:260). A summary of this relation between social space and time given by Farratt (1977:121) is well put. "Time is basically a matter of social relationships; the past is important precisely because it determines the social structure and behavior of the present...The subservience of the time concept to the social order in traditional African societies can scarcely be denied. It remains that the predominance of the past is basically the dominance of certain ancient institutions which aim at preserving

the social system.

John Middleton (1960:238), drawing on his studies among the Lugbara, has attempted to extend an understanding of this relation of social space and time to the social space that extends beyond the lineage relationships of a people. He found that discussion of people in the remote past, undifferentiated by geneological relations with contemporaries, corresponded with the way strangers outside the lineage structure were spoken of. Thus, mythical beings in the remote past are given perverse descriptions and depicted as inverted beings. Likewise, strangers in remote regions from Lugbara country, with whom there is no contact, are given similar descriptions. With a decrease in social space, as well as temporal distance, there is a corresponding gradational decrease in mythical-perverse characterization; as represented in legendary Lugbara figures with parallels in the way references were made to early Europeans. "The more remote the being, the more its behavior is conceived as being the utter negation of that to do with kinship." Middleton's has given a diagrammatic representation of this temporal-spatial interrelationship that is helpful.



Returning to our earlier question, before concluding with some brief remarks on changes that are occurring in African temporal consciousness, it has become apparent that, with temporal notions having the social correlations they do in traditional African societies, a clear distinction between religion and ideology would be difficult to make. Most writers seeking a sui generis religious significance to temporal consciousness seem to have in mind something like Eliade's (1974) notion of sacred and profane time, with cyclical regenerations of the sacred-mythical time occurring in religious rituals. Thus, Victor Turner (1977) in developing the notion of a liminal period, in rites of passages, appeals to this element of a timeless experience of the sacred that contributes to the generation of *communitas*. Benjamin Ray (1976:41), notes how this sacred time is located in the distant past for the African. "In ritual (a time out of time) the mythical past is constantly recoverable...For this reason traditional African thought turns to the past for redemptive and soteriological power: it does not look to the future." In this view, the mythical past serves a religious function regenerating meaning and order in the temporal present.

Evidence, however, exists for ideological uses of such religious notions of time. Warren d'Azevedo (1967:23) writes that;

the Gola respect for knowledge of the past as a response both to its instrumental value in solving problems of the present and its quality of sacredness as the thoughts and experiences of the ancestors... As the ancestors remain deeply concerned about their private interests... it follows that they prefer a view of the past which protects these interests... It is taken for granted that the view of the past put forward by an elder will

be the view which is most advantageous to him, his family, and his ancestors...Truth, then, is that which brings about the desired results.

It is clear not only in this quote, but even in the notions mentioned above, that Victor Turner has developed, as well as in our discussion of the relation between social space and time, that temporal consciousness is a part of a cosmology that reinforces social formations. This extends as well to social formations that involve relations of exploitation. Jan Vansina's study (1962), of the interlacustre kingdom in Rwanda, describes how the dominant Tutsi, in that society, mystified the geneologies of the Mwamis (kings) in cycles of five repeating legendary names to reinforce the myths of divine origin of Tutsi rule.

If we conclude, as T.O. Beidelman does in his study on the Kaguru (1963:20) that Africans "reckon time in ways inextricably linked with the other aspects of their ideologies and social organization", rather than merely looking for elements of Eliade's (1974) model in traditional African thought, the possibility emerges of tracing historical developments. A fruitful study might be to compare and contrast time notions of traditional African societies that maintain various modes of production; in-as-much as this has proved to be a useful concept. And where a ruling class has emerged, in the formation of a kingdom, a comparison of the temporal consciousness of the ruling class with those in subjection could be made. Van Binsbergen (1981:156) suggests that in cases of early state formation, "For a limited number of people time would

increasingly be perceived as a process of unique individual ascendance ...The cyclical present began to give way to a perception of the linear progress of both individual careers and political history." Linear temporal consciousness accompanies rising individualism as ambition is future oriented. And, it is consciousness of this dimension of time that was accelerated, for some, with the increasing penetration into Africa of outside influences.

Most African societies today articulate with outside influences. As a result temporal consciousness may be syncretistic, ambiguous, or very intense. "The African is likely to live in a plural world and draw on two cosmologies and symbolic systems" (MacGaffey 1981:245). Many Africans will understand one way of looking at life as being traditional and another as being European and adapt in their ability to move from one to the other. Thus, traditional experiences of time are preserved while Western notions are adopted and used in separate contexts. But the traditional notions are unlikely to remain unaffected with ambiguity encroaching and possibly generating new conceptualizations that attempt to preserve continuity with the past while adapting toward a broader paradigm of meaning. With temporal consciousness being a very prominent element in religion, such changes will, fundamentally, alter the religious consciousness of a people.⁵

A shift from a temporal consciousness that essentially functions to "keep the arbitrary at bay" toward one which "allows for the absorption of a large variety of experiences without stability being put in jeopardy" (Mol 1982:323) has parallels with changes in other categories of thought as well

(Horton 1967). Western thought absorbs diversity and change with a more abstract temporal consciousness and with reliance on the notion of progress; which to some extent is also the "myth of progress". In-as-much as African traditional thought lacks a future temporal dimension there is a check to internally generated change. But one must keep in mind, as well, the ideological use of the notions of "civilizing progress" as justification for imperialistic exploits on the part of Europeans. Mbiti's notion, that African thought lacks a concept of the future, needs to be handled cautiously. Even for Mbiti (1970:362) it serves as a reason for advocating Christianity, as the preferred religion for Africans. This Mbiti (1971:57) does, despite his criticism of mission efforts that introduced, "almost exclusively, a few aspects of the futurist element of Eschatology, thereby, coming into serious conflict with linguistic and conceptual understanding of the (African) and stressing what amounts to a minor part of New Testament Eschatology." Shifting theological attention, dramatically, to the future "when the conceptual background of the peoples concerned allows only a very short future" precipitated intense temporal consciousness giving rise to millenarian movements (Mbiti 1971:58). These movements, Mbiti (1970:36), views as a tragedy and he advocates (1971:61) a corrected Christian Eschatology in which "Time is subject to eschatology and not vice versa...Time helps us to understand the horizontal dimension of Eschatology; but Eschatology has also the vertical dimension which is non-temporal and which defies all attempts to horizontalize

it." With this, Mbiti is seeking, for his fellow Africans, a more responsible and less vulnerable perspective on the future, in a time of accelerated change.

This essay has surveyed many of the elements in the temporal consciousness of African peoples as well as views and opinions on those aspects. Still, as we have pointed out, change is not something that only occurred to African societies when Arabic and European influences penetrated Africa; though these influences did accelerate change. African societies were changing in pre-contact times in various directions leading to different means of livelihood and relations of production. If temporal consciousness is, a priori, fundamental to thought and symbolic system formation, it seems closer investigation could detect variations that could be delineated in the way in which time is experienced and the function temporal consciousness serves in differing societies in Africa. And further, one would hope that Africans don't merely attempt to "catch-up" to a Western view of time, which is, in some respects, morally bankrupt, but can, as Mbiti has sought to do, out of the struggle with the experience of changing temporal consciousness, contribute to humankind a more responsible approach to the future.

NOTES

- 1) Sherover offers some insightful analysis of how in the West notions of time have shaped human response to the perennial questions as posed by I. Kant: What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope for?
- 2) Mol studies the dialectic between integration and differentiation in a society and finds "four elements safeguarding the integrative side of the dialectic": a) objectification or transcendental ordering. b) commitment or emotional anchoring c) ritual or sameness enacting. d) myth or dilectical dramatization. Temporal consciousness is involved in each with various possibilities.
- 3) There are parallels evident in this understanding with Horton's (1967) contrast between Western Science as an open system and Traditional African thought as a closed system.
- 4) Leach's notion (1979:224) that the temporal consciousness of many people may be dominated most by a pattern of alteration, a "discontinuity of repeated contrasts", (more pendulum like than cyclical) finds support in Africa. Alterations between night and day, rainy season and dry season, as well as between good times and bad times with accompanying role change rituals (Rigby 1968:172) are a prominent part of African temporal consciousness that we do not develop in this essay.
- 5) In his study of religious change, Van Binsbergen (1981:154-159:168) has attempted to formulate a means of measuring the extent of change by registering change on five scales including: time, ecology, supernatural entities, communalism, and witchcraft.

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Prize review:

"The Promise of Inequality"
Kwanda [Spring 83]

René Lemardand?

1/1 (to (1) (end): Explain the product function? It is somewhat "abstract"?

1/1 (middle: & the "Albanian demand" explained further?

1/1 (middle-end: "Abstractly demanded society" (meaning?)

1/1 say "surplus" what? labor? value?
Must be "surplus something"!

- [Can it be "as in many places?]

3/1/1: There is a widening (Albanian) argument ^{and "costs"} ~~and~~
interpretation of abolition and Louis Duménil's
notion of "Liberation" in Home Livelihoods?

4/1/1 middle: Do you agree that with "had the same
function" in Kwanda is wrong "in our culture"?
[Can?]

5/2/1: Has Magred been a notion of "role of production"?

5/3/1: So, "feudalism without any reference to land
ownership" is totally empty!

6/3/- the "industrialization" argument (Parsons?) is tautologous

7/16/21: You should explain more about your work by the sentence in parentheses.

~~8/1/21: Luciano Ravigerita is not a bibliographer.~~

10/13/21. Luc de Heurdi's approach ("despotic") is equally ideological.

11/2/21 (Frank). His middle sentence is not clear, it needs expansion.

12/1/21 Clara: You used the term "politicized culture" but do not explain about your mean and.

13/9/21. See Vidal reference crucial [good you politicized Wd of 2!]

(SB)

See 16/2/21. Very good - but not very analytical, as you point out. [You could have expanded this book of limitation of Vidal with Book's attempt in the Kahn (Lebanon book)]

17/2/21: Good point of reference.

19/2/21 You could have developed more explicitly the mode of production work, and how such an ideology or kind of ideology can be historically generated by it and its transmission by class / capitalist / class domination.

Notes

"Temperament consciousness" #

1/11/1: "Normalise concept of 'too'?"

5/2/1: Being an overall notion of "the African"
nature of this (even if part) is dangerous,
especially since it is derived from "linguistic
evidence"?

↓
especially [6/2] "no filter"?! [see my
paper].

6/2/ed: When does the "we deem" "label a program"
come from? This must be examined before
a judgement or decision is made!
[see filter point in 6/3]

7/11- Gilman's analysis is all "unfair", only insufficiently
worked out.



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