

How do we know time is passing: An anthropological perspective

Time is an ambiguous term for a broadly abstract concept and so when discussing time in any context it is often difficult to avoid both the philosophical and psychological aspects. One must ask how and why do we define the passage of time. In other words how do we know it is passing? The awareness of the passage of time is one of the most fundamental elements that define us as humans. Different cultures have developed various ways to mark the passing of time, often linked to environmental and survival activities as well as ritual and myth based activities. Even at its simplest level man has been observing the cycle of day passing into night since the birth of consciousness. But, as Geertz (1973:389) notes “surely one of the most important is by the recognition in oneself and in one’s fellowman, of the process of biological aging...”. He goes onto to make the point that how one views this process creates an unbreakable link with how one views history and the concept of time. In this essay I will contrast Western cultural concepts of the passing of time with some examples of those experienced by indigenous cultures and examine whether these alternative definitions are radically different or merely superficial.

Evans-Pritchard identified two distinct concepts of time when studying The Nuer of East Africa. Ecological time, “mainly reflections of their relations to the environment...” and structural time, “...reflections of their relations to one another in the social structure.” (Evans-Pritchard 1940:94) The ecological time is anchored in their relationship to the land and the environment and is cyclical. This means that time moves in circles in harmony with environmental factors such as the availability of water and food and the different seasons, rain and drought being the two main ones. The Nuer move between village and camp depending on these seasons and perform various practical tasks and other social activities accordingly. Evans-Pritchard (1960:99-100) also identifies twelve months in the Nuer year but these are more in tune to the lunar cycles and are not referenced in the same way that we reference our months. They define their time by its relation to a certain activity or event and without units of time between the month and the day and night they define the present and the near past and near future by their acute awareness of the phases of the moon. The second notion of time is that of structural time which is concerned with an individual’s relationship within the social structure. This is time over a longer period

and is more abstract, involving events that are exclusive to each tribal history incorporating major events like floods and wars. They also define time by the distance between kinship age-sets, of which there are six at any one time; this is their lineage. This distance goes back as far as their tradition allows, akin to an Englishman following his family tree. They then place events along these lines to define their place in the present. Beyond their family tree or age sets, which in our terms is about a hundred years, their time passes into the mythological and so “lineage structure never grows, it follows that the distance between the beginning of the world and that of the present day remains unalterable”. (Evans-Pritchard 1940:108)

Another notable ethnographic study, which, amongst other things, observed the notion of time, was made by Clifford Geertz when studying the Balinese people. Geertz (1973:392) identifies two systems of time measurement - the lunar-solar calendar and one he calls the ‘permutational’ system that comprises of a series of calendars. Where we have one cycle of seven days the Balinese permutational calendar “... consists of ten different cycles of day-names. These cycles are of varying lengths. The longest contains ten day names [...]. Similarly, there are nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two and even - the ultimate of a ‘contemporized view of time - one-day name cycles’”. The Balinese use the five, six and seven day cycles primarily and in combination with each other to form days for specific occasions. From the various combinations larger, ordered sets of time are produced consisting of thirty, thirty-five, forty-two and two hundred and ten quantum units “days” (*Ibid*:392). Different combinations determine whether the day has a religious or practical significance. Geertz notes that these units of time are not used to measure the passing of time but rather to mark the manifestation of human experience. We could compare this to the two units of 25 and December which can fall on any one of the seven day names in the seven day cycle of what we term the week. In this example the human experience that is manifested, in this instance culturally specific to the UK and other Western cultures, is called Christmas. Using their permutational calendar their lives are punctuated with the many religious ‘holidays’ and temple festivals. They also have days for a vast array of everyday activities. Their lunar -solar calendar, which was introduced by the Hindus in the distant past, consists of twelve months and is related and utilised for agricultural activities. Geertz (*ibid*:404) also talks of the absence of climax in all areas of the life of the Balinese. This means that quarrels never come to

a head and even in ritual and celebrations it is the lead up and lead down that is more notable as opposed to the actual event or the climax of the celebration. “Balinese social life lacks climax because it takes place in a motionless present, a vectorless now”. So does this mean that the Balinese live in a constant ‘now’ which consists of change dependent on the activity / holiday rather than change with regards to the passing of time? Appadurai (2010:202) summarises Geertz’s view on Balinese time perception when referring to Bloch, “Geertz is right in arguing that the Balinese have two kinds of past: A ritualised past which denies duration, and a non-ritual mundane past concerned with the pragmatic activities as agriculture and politics in which duration is universally recognised”.

Both these accounts of time have two distinct concepts. The first being the tangible relationship between man and earth which manifests as a *practical* and *cyclical* concept of time i.e. when to plant the crops, when to harvest etc. This first concept is straightforward and universal. All cultures observe the most suitable conditions for agriculture, even as far back as the Mesolithic, humans would have had an awareness of when certain fruit would be ripe in a certain area and so would have been aware of different ‘times’. The second is abstract and informed by the many social relationships and cultural practices, *cultural* time. For the Nuer, this is limited to a few generations and then back to the mythic past, which is always the same distance away; and so time never elongates. This is not unlike the Balinese who live in the ‘motionless present’ as Geertz stated. This is, of course, simplifying how the Nuer and the Balinese experience time and unless we were born and brought up in these cultures we can never fully perceive time in the same way as they do, if indeed they do perceive it any differently. With more and more exposure to western culture their traditional time keeping may not be what it once was.

Turning attention to Western concepts of time we can identify similarities straight away. We use practical units of time we call seconds, minutes, hours and days; these regulate our practical daily life. We then have longer units called years, decades, centuries and millenniums. These also impact on the daily practical life (defining the culture to a certain extent) but they also reach back into history and forward into potential futures. This is a form of cultural time and is associated with memory. Our personal memory in terms of the span of an individual’s life and that of the

surrounding generations; and a shared social memory concerning cultural events which can be anything from the death of a cultural icon to a world war. However, these shared memories are only relevant to the culture that they affect. Paul Connerton (2008:2) highlights how the present is defined by how we remember the past, “[c]oncerning memory as such, we may note that our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past. We experience our present world in context which is casually connected with past events and objects which we are not experiencing when we are experiencing the present.” But even across the many various western cultures this can vary greatly depending on how history is perceived. Connerton (2008:12) goes on to state that “... an individual’s consciousness of time is to a large degree an awareness of society’s continuity, or more exactly of the image of that continuity which the society creates.” Only by our recognition and awareness of historical events do we have an awareness that time is passing. Our history and so our awareness of the passage of time is constructed from the histories or stories we tell ourselves. Would the end of history, be the end of time; a perpetual now?

Time can also be distorted almost to the point of non-existence by the use of perception altering substances. Huxley (1959:20) noted the quantity of time he had whilst on mescaline, “[p]lenty of it, but exactly how much was entirely irrelevant. I could, of course, have looked at my watch; but my watch, I knew, was in another universe. My actual experience had been, was still, of an indefinite duration or alternatively of a perpetual present made up of one continually changing apocalypse.” This adds an additional dilemma that questions not only the nature of time but also the nature of reality. One could argue that these two concepts are intrinsically linked. In the west, time is tied up to work and so our whole system of time reflects our desires. The desire of what we want to consume and own and the desire of what we want to be and be perceived as. If the very concept of time is questioned then it could be asked ‘what is the point of getting up in the morning’?

Another abstract concept is the notion that change does not necessarily equate to the passage of time. Tim Ingold (1986:132) suggests that, “[i]t follows that wherever in the world we find change or novelty, growth or decay, progression or retrogression, we can no longer regard it as the work of time, but only as the aggregate of discrete

events strung out *in time*". Beneath the superficial constraints of everyday life and history, the western mind turns to science for the answers. One could argue this is a fundamental difference between the developed western view and that of indigenous cultures and societies. So the Western world has developed a scientific understanding of much that underlines what we call reality but has still yet to fully comprehend time. All we really know is that we are born and we die. In between these two events many other events take place. We then define our place in the society by defining the society's place in history, but this too becomes problematic as history passes into the mythic as longer periods of time separate them from the present. If we then go further and further back into deep time we are presented with an ambiguous and unresolved question of origin. To conceptualise an abstract concept like the origin of the universe requires some form of story or creation myth. This is evident in most cultures the world over, be it the Big Bang Theory of modernity or the breath of Brahma in the Hindu tradition.

I would conclude that different societies do not have radically different concepts of time only different ways of experiencing time and expressing how that time is passing, dependent on their personal and cultural memories. Even within each society the way that each individual experiences time can vary greatly from individual to individual. On a final note I would like to make a simple comparison. Aboriginal Australians refer to 'Dreamtime', to some communities this means the past, present and future in concurrence with each other, "...communities regard the 'Dreamtime' as being eternal, in the sense that the structure laid down in the primordial period continues unaltered into the present and future..." (Dean 1996:75). Einstein could just have easily been referring to dreamtime when he said, "[p]eople like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion" (Yeatts 2007:116).

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