

The Circle and the Line: African Time Before the Clock



Two Ways of Counting a Life

Before a gathering begins, an elder pours water onto the ground. Not much. A steady hand, a quiet stream, and the names spoken low - those who came before, those whose shoulders hold the ceiling of this room. The water disappears into the earth as though it were received. And it was. The gesture assumes that the dead are close enough to accept what the living offer. Not symbolically. Not as metaphor. Close enough to drink.

What understanding of time makes such a gesture make sense?

It is not the understanding most of us were handed. We learned to count our days along a line - a straight path drawn from somewhere behind us toward a future that recedes with every step forward. On that line, yesterday is a place we have already left, and the ancestors, however beloved, are behind us - honored, perhaps, but gone. To pour water for them in that framework is poetry. Touching, but not literal. A remembrance, not a transaction.

But there are peoples who never drew time as a line. For them, time moves the way water moves in a basin - circling, returning, carrying what was poured back to the hand that poured it. Seasons do not pass; they come around. Generations do not fold away; they fold into one another, the newborn receiving the name of the one who just stepped beyond the visible edge. In such a

world, the dead are not behind us at all. They are beside us - one turn of the circle away, close enough to receive what is offered, close enough to answer when called.

The shape a community gives to time is not a philosophical luxury. It decides whether the past feels like a closed door or an open room. It determines whether memory is a burden to set down or a resource to draw from. And it shapes, quietly but absolutely, whether a people can lose its ancestors - or whether it carries them forward as a living presence, consulted and accountable, holding a seat no distance can vacate.

This essay is the threshold of a larger turn. Before the Archive restores African sovereignty and civilization in their fullness - before it asks the reader to encounter what was standing in these lands long before the rupture - the reader must first learn to feel time bend. Not as theory, but as orientation. A way of standing that changes what you can see.

Two shapes will guide us. The line, which the West drew and which taught the world to leave the past behind. And the circle, which much of African thought held - and holds still - where nothing is ever fully gone, and the ancestors wait, not behind us, but one turn ahead.

The Line: How the West Learned to Leave the Past Behind

Linear time is not a neutral measurement. It is a worldview dressed as mathematics. In the dominant Western frame, time travels as an arrow - departing from a fixed past, passing through a present that slips instantly into memory, racing toward a future that never circles back. What lies behind is finished. Archived. Distant. The present is merely the narrow edge between what has ended and what has not yet begun.

This way of counting carries consequences. When the past becomes only "behind us," it loses its grip on the living. Ancestors become absence. Memory becomes nostalgia rather than counsel. The old is presumed surpassed by the new - progress becomes the measure of value itself. To dwell too long on the past is to risk falling behind.

Marimba Ani, in *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (1994), identifies this drive toward separation and forward motion as a defining feature of the Western worldview - not a neutral given, but a choice embedded in culture and enforced by institutions. E. P. Thompson traced its economic dimension in his landmark essay "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism" (*Past & Present*, 1967): as industrial capitalism reshaped daily life, the clock turned time into a commodity. Hours became interchangeable units of labor and production. A meeting at 9:00 carried identical weight as a meeting at 2:00, provided both fit the schedule. The minute became a coin in circulation, and we became its debtors.

For the organizer opening a grant application, the advocate tracking legislative timelines, the scholar writing toward a tenure clock - this rhythm is not abstract. It governs the fiscal year, the funding cycle, the deadline that waits for no one. We live inside the line whether we consented to it or not.

And there is a loss within it. When the past is only behind us, when it cannot return to meet us again, we forfeit something essential: the ability to consult those who came before. Not as symbols, not as inspiration, but as active presence. The line teaches us to march forward while leaving everything else behind. But what if what we need is not ahead of us at all - what if what we need is already here, waiting to be acknowledged?

This is one way to count a life. It is not the only way. Nor is it the oldest.

The Circle: African Time and the Return

Across much of the African continent, time moved differently. Not as a line marching onward, but as a circle returning to its source. Seasons do not vanish; they renew. Generations do not depart; they recur. Events gain their meaning not from where they sit on a timeline, but from what they bring forth when they return.

John Mbiti, whose *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969) remains the cornerstone of modern understanding of African temporal thought, distinguishes between two modes of reckoning: *Zamani* and *Sasa*. *Sasa* is the present-facing now - the time of immediate experience, of the living, of events that still pulse with freshness. *Zamani* is the deep past - the realm where events sink after their initial occurrence, settling into memory and ultimately into the ancestral world. What matters is not the position of an event on a line, but its meaning. An event is measured by what it does to relationships, not by when it happened.

This is not mere repetition. The circle is not stagnation. Each return carries forward what came before - the harvest that follows the planting, the child who inherits the name, the ceremony that gathers the community again and again. Renewal is not the same as stasis. The circle turns, but what turns does not disappear.

Kwame Gyekye, writing from the Akan tradition in *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (1987), refines Mbiti's framework with necessary precision. He warns against reading the circle as though "everything repeats" - a flattening that would deny the genuine novelty of each cycle. Gyekye also raises a second corrective worth naming: Mbiti's suggestion that African temporal thought lacks a genuine orientation toward the future has been contested by later scholars, and rightly so. The Akan conception, as Gyekye reads it, acknowledges both transformation and anticipation within recurrence. The seed planted in spring becomes the harvest of autumn - not because spring has returned unchanged, but because the cycle itself carries forward what was given to it.

In this framework, nothing is ever fully behind you. The past remains in the room, reachable, still speaking. To walk in the circle is to walk with those who came before - not as ghosts, but as witnesses to what continues.

Sankofa: Returning to Retrieve What Was Left

Among the Akan people of Ghana, there is a symbol known as *sankofa* - the Twi phrase *se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi* translates, roughly, as “it is not wrong to go back and fetch what you forgot.” The image is a bird whose body moves forward while its head turns backward to retrieve an egg from behind. Forward motion and backward reach are not in conflict. They are the same gesture. To move ahead well, one must carry what was left behind.

Gyekye, in *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (1996), treats *sankofa* not as proverb but as method - a coherent philosophical principle rooted in Akan cultural values and encoded in the *adinkra* visual tradition that has carried Akan thought across centuries. It is not nostalgia. It is retrieval. A discipline of reaching back for what the present still needs. To flatten *sankofa* into a motivational slogan is to miss what it was designed to do: teach that what looks like the past may in fact be the resource that carries you forward.

The egg in the bird's beak represents what is at risk of being abandoned. The turning head represents the willingness to pause, to retrieve, to integrate what would otherwise be lost. The forward body represents movement toward the future - not forgetting, but bringing forward.

For a community rebuilding what displacement scattered, *sankofa* is not decoration on a wall. It is strategy. Reach back to recover the tools the present still needs. The name given to a newborn. The ceremony that marks a passage. The story that teaches what survival looks like. All of these are retrievals. All of these require the discipline of turning back while moving ahead.

This is where the collection takes root. If time is a circle, then nothing is ever truly lost. It can be retrieved. It can be carried forward. The rupture did not sever the thread - it interrupted the turning. And what was interrupted can resume.

The Kongo Cosmogram: Mapping the Turning World

Perhaps no symbol captures African temporal philosophy more precisely than the Kongo cosmogram - the *dikenga* or *yowa* cross. It is a circle divided by a cross, marking the sun's daily journey and the soul's passage through existence. It is visual philosophy, mapping time, being, and the boundary between worlds.

Kimbwandende Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, himself a keeper of Kongo knowledge, explains the four points from within the tradition rather than about it in *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kôngo: Tying the Spiritual Knot* (2001). Dawn marks birth - the emergence into the visible world. Noon marks the fullness of life - strength, clarity, and the peak of power. Sunset marks death - not as exit, but as crossing. Midnight marks the world of the ancestors - the realm of the invisible, where those who have passed continue to exist in fullness.

These four moments flow around an unbroken circle. Each leads into the next. Birth into life, life into death, death into the ancestral world, the ancestral world back into birth again. The cycle does not end. It turns.

The horizon line - the *Kalunga* line - divides the visible world above from the ancestral world below. Yet it also connects them. Water (*Kalunga*) both separates and joins. Death is not an exit but a turning point. The ancestors sit one arc away, not gone but relocated.

Wyatt MacGaffey's careful scholarship on the BaKongo, gathered in *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire* (1986), deepens this understanding. The *Kalunga* line, he shows, is not a wall. It is a membrane permeable to prayer, to libation, to memory. The living and the dead remain in unbroken relation across it. Robert Farris Thompson, in *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1983), follows the *yowa* cross into the diaspora - transformed but recognizable, carrying the same logic across soil and ocean. That thread will be picked up again when the collection reaches Essay 5.

The cosmogram makes visible what the circle argues. Death is not an exit. The ancestors are not behind us. They are one turn away - waiting, present, answerable.

The Rhythm of the Real: Agrarian and Ritual Time

Cosmologies must be lived to be understood. The African temporal frameworks described here were not merely believed. They were practiced, enacted, and reproduced across generations in the rhythms of the land and the gathering.

The calendar, in much of traditional African life, was written by the earth itself - rains, sowing, growth, harvest, rest. Time was kept by relationship to seasons and soil rather than by the mechanical clock. An hour of ceremony and an hour of labor did not carry the same weight of time. One sustained the community's memory; the other produced its food. Both mattered, but they measured different things.

Paul Bohannan's study of the Tiv of Nigeria, "Concepts of Time Among the Tiv" (*Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 1953), brings this into sharp focus. The Tiv measured time through market cycles and social events rather than abstract units. Days were named by their purpose, not their number. An hour was weighted by what occurred within it, not by its position on a dial. The planting season did not arrive because February became March. It arrived because the rains returned, because the soil was ready, because the community gathered to begin the work together. Dominique Zahan, in *The Religion, Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa* (1979), examining comparable patterns across the continent, confirms that the agrarian and ceremonial calendar functioned as lived practice, not theoretical speculation. The land itself was a clock.

Ritual time worked alongside the agrarian. Mbiti's treatment of festival and ceremony in *African Religions and Philosophy* reveals recurring anchors of communal life - moments that gather

people back to what endures. Ceremony does not simply mark the passing of time; it suspends linear time long enough for memory to catch up with practice. Specific rites vary by tradition - the Yoruba *Egungun* festivals, the harvest ceremonies of the Akan - but the underlying principle holds: the community returns, again and again, to the moments that remind it who it is and who came before.

This is a second clock - one tuned to memory, kinship, and return - running beneath the imposed one. The deadline does not disappear. But communities have long kept another measure of time alongside it. The question is which clock governs your gathering. Which clock tells you when you've had enough. Which clock knows when to pour the water.

Why the Ancestors Are Never Behind Us

The threads converge here. The line leaves the past behind. The circle keeps returning to it. *Sankofa* makes retrieval a discipline. The cosmogram places the ancestors one turn away, not gone. Lived rhythms prove this was practice, not only philosophy.

A people who experiences time as a circle never truly leaves its ancestors behind. It walks with them. This is the claim the whole collection rests upon. Not a metaphor. Not a sentiment. A claim about how time itself is structured - and one with consequences for every community that has ever been told its history began at the moment of harm.

If time is a circle, then slavery interrupted the turning - it did not end it. The thread can be picked up again because it was never a line to sever, but a wheel still turning. As Cheikh Anta Diop argued in *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (1974), the continuity of African civilization runs deeper than any rupture imposed upon it. The ancestors remain accessible because they were never pushed behind us in the first place. They were only obscured by a clock that told us to forget.

For the organizer who opens a meeting with the names of those who came before, for the advocate who reaches back to find the argument the present still needs - this is not sentiment. It is orientation. The past is not a place you left. It is a presence you carry, and it is still speaking.

The Threshold Opens

The water poured at the gathering's beginning is no longer just a custom. It is a claim about the shape of time. The dead are present enough to receive it. The ancestors are not gone. They are one turn ahead.

Having loosened the grip of the line, the reader can enter the coming collections not as a visitor to a distant “before,” but as an inheritor standing inside a continuous present. The ancestors are near. The next essay asks what it means to live with them as active presence rather than absence - not as a philosophy to admire, but as a relationship to inhabit.

Begin wherever you are standing. The circle always returns.

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