

in much of the West, toward the future. God may be eternal but he does not hold out hope of eschatological fulfillment to man. Indeed, traditionally the African may plan ahead for only a few months and put the real stress on life in the Now as interpreted in terms of his individual and community consciousness of the past. The reckoning of time is not by numerical chronology but in terms of the phenomena which dominate life: sunrise, milking time, time to draw water, the 'hot' month, time of 'grain in the ear', lunar months of pregnancy, etc. The older the person the longer his Now-consciousness with its set of remembered experiences. All of these have their foundation in the community's past and in the religious ontology at its roots. To the latter one turns for an explanation of the creation of the world, death, the development of one's language, customs, and tribal wisdom. As Mbiti wrote, "African peoples expect human history to continue forever, in the rhythm of moving from the Now of the Past ... the days, months, seasons and years have no end, just as there is no end to the rhythm of birth, marriage, procreation and death."¹² No newness is expected, no hope of renewal. Instead, the new -- an eclipse, a drought. or the birth of twins -- is likely to be treated as a bad omen and as an invasion of the ontological harmony calling perhaps for a special religious rite.

Among the east African tribes stressed in Mbiti's study there is a conception of immortality only in the sense of being remembered after one dies by the community. Indeed, a primary reason for marriage is to have children who can then remember to call the spirit by its proper name as it continues among the "living dead." Fundamental to all aspects of social life is this community of interests between the living and the dead. It is not solely because so much depends on oral history that one's "existence" may last for only three or four generations. More fundamentally everything slips into the forgotten past because it is after all part of the *rhythmic cycle of time*.

Mbiti is of course fully aware that he is talking about the traditional tribal view and not about the emerging "third world" which reflects the impact of Christianity and Islam, Western Capitalism and Eastern Marxism with its secularization of the Christian hope. These influences together with technology and the new nationalism are part of the crisis of the emerging historical consciousness with its sense of liberation and of planning for the future. But the historian of the African peoples needs to take into account the cluster of ontological and religious presuppositions concerning the temporal process -- the past-oriented Now and the appeal to nature's rhythms -- both to understand tribal Africa and the distinctive character of the new historical awareness.¹³

Time and the Timeless in Hindu Thought

We switch now from a pastness-dominated model to one which stretches the imagination with the vastness of its conception of time and with its distinctive appeal to the future. India's long Hindu tradition reaches back into the oral literature of Brahmanism beginning about 1500 B.C. The