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in a Rural African Society**



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Living on Luo time: reckoning sequence, duration, history and biography in a rural African society

Michael Dietler and Ingrid Herbich

Archaeologists and historians share a common fundamental dependence upon the ability to reckon time. This fact has led to a good deal of self-conscious reflection about the nature and conceptualization of time by historians (especially Braudel 1980) and, more recently, by archaeologists (cf. Bailey 1981; 1983; Shanks and Tilley 1987; Bradley 1991; Clark 1992). In particular, much attention has been focused upon the differences between conceptions of time and chronology employed by such academic analysts and those held by the peoples of the past who are the subject of investigation, and upon the potential problems such differences may pose for interpretation. Social anthropologists also, especially as they have rediscovered the importance of history, have grappled with understanding relative conceptions of time and its reckoning among contemporary societies (cf. Leach 1954; Bloch 1977; Howe 1981; Munn 1992; Gell 1992). This paper offers some reflections on the reckoning of time among the Luo people of western Kenya as a further contribution to this evolving discussion.¹ In particular, it examines the ways that the passage of time is conceived of and reckoned in a society which has not yet been entirely transformed by the penetration of conceptions of temporality that underlie Western capitalist societies (and the academic disciplines which are a part of them), as well as offering some observations about potential ramifications for archaeological interpretation.

Perhaps the most starkly polemical challenge to archaeologists to reconsider their approach to time is to be found in a recent provocative essay by Shanks and Tilley (1987) in which they argued that archaeologists, in applying concepts of chronology in their study of the past, are appropriating the past by 'imposing a Western valuation of measured abstract time' onto societies which experienced time in ways different from the way we, as products of late capitalism, do (1987: 136). While this critique raises some interesting issues, their dichotomous classification of time conceptualization according to a capitalist/pre-capitalist great divide between 'abstract' and 'substantial' time (with a list of opposing attributes such as 'measured' versus 'marked' time, 'managed time' versus 'submission to the passage of time', 'repetitive segments of regular succession' versus 'self-enclosed recurrent moments', etc. (1987: 128)) appears excessively schematic. Moreover, it runs the risk of

lapsing into a kind of insidious 'primitive reason' position which denies non-Western or pre-capitalist peoples the capacity for abstract thought, and it does little to illuminate the genuine complexity of the range of ways that temporality is conceived and reckoned.

Simple reference to the Gaulish calendar of Coligny (Olmsted 1992) should be sufficient to dispel the notion that only capitalist societies reckon time by abstract repetitive units and have an interest in measuring duration into the past and future. Capitalism did indeed bring about important changes in people's relationship to time, but these do not derive simply from abstraction. Nor, as the Luo case demonstrates, can they be meaningfully reduced to a list of binary opposites. It is important to understand the nature of differences and similarities between the temporal conceptions of archaeologists and those of the people they study, and to assess how these might affect interpretation. But such understanding must derive from examination of non-capitalist cases in a variety of contexts rather than from a projection of opposites from a list of capitalist characteristics.

The Luo

The Luo people live in the basin which surrounds the Winam Gulf of Lake Victoria in western Kenya. They speak a Nilotic language related to that of several peoples in Uganda and the Sudan and quite different from that of their Bantu-speaking neighbors in Kenya. Luo livelihood depends upon small-scale agriculture, animal husbandry, and fishing. They grow a variety of grain (sorghum, millet, maize), root (cassava, sweet potatoes), and other food crops (e.g. beans, bananas, lentils, peanuts) which vary locally in importance. Homesteads containing polygynous extended families dot the landscape. Kinship is reckoned patrilineally, and post-marital residence is patrilocal. The 'traditional' political structure is acephalous (i.e. without centralized authority), although there now exists a system of government-appointed 'chiefs' who serve the national administration. Current administrative divisions are based upon the territorial boundaries of the various Luo subgroups as they existed at the moment of the imposition of colonial rule. In the pre-colonial era, political organization was based upon fluid alliances among these shifting subgroups in an approximation of the segmentary lineage system (Evans-Pritchard 1949; Southall 1952; Ogot 1967).

Luo people do not commonly engage in philosophical speculations on the nature of time. Yet, as will be discussed below, time and the process of reckoning it have important social, operational, and personal significance for the Luo. While people in Western societies are often said to be nearly obsessed with time ('saving' it, 'spending' it, measuring it ever more precisely), a pervasive engagement with time is equally evident in Luo society, albeit in different ways. For example, Luo personal names very commonly have a temporal origin, linking an individual to a time of day, a season of the year, a stage in a temporal sequence, or an historical event. Moreover, the structuring of time figures prominently in the representation of social relations and the reproduction of 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1977; Mauss 1936), that is, dispositions guiding practice.

Given the absence of explicit speculation, it is largely by examining the more quotidian practice of reckoning time that one is able to discern some of the underlying concepts which people hold on the subject and their perceptions of sequence and duration. This

paper is structured around a consideration of both the different modes of conceiving temporality and the ways they are articulated in practice to mark and calculate the passage of time. As with most peoples, the Luo conception of time is not a unitary or homogeneous one. Rather, it consists of a complex matrix of linear and cyclical conceptions which are applied to different facets of life and articulated in a variety of ways in the process of reckoning time in different contexts. In general, for the Luo the passage of time is a relational concept, and the Luo reckon time by a process of establishing relations between cyclical phases and sequential series of events. This process of chronological reckoning serves to establish both the order and duration of events and to link past time to present time and personal time to more abstract temporal structures.

Quotidian cycle

The shortest and most basic cyclical conceptualization of time centers around the observation of the daily alternation between night and day, and the movement of the sun and moon across the sky. This daily cycle is divided into named segments of slightly variable length which structure the performance of quotidian activities (cf. Ogutu-Obunga 1974). Personal identity is often linked to these periods, as people are very commonly named after the time of the day during which they were born. For example, *odiechieng'* (which derives from the term for the sun, *chieng'*) is the period of midday (from roughly 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. by Western clock time), and boys born during this time will be called *Ochieng'* while girls will be called *Achieng'*. *Odhiambo* is the term for the following period of late afternoon and evening, giving rise to the names *Odhiambo* (for males) and *Adhiambo* (for females). *Otieno* is the period of night (hence the names *Otieno* and *Atieno*); however, those born after about midnight will be called *Owuor* (or *Oduor*) and *Awour*. Early morning is known as *Okinyi*, yielding the female name *Akinyi*. Males born during this period are more often called *Omondi*, after the word *mondo*, meaning 'to be early' or 'punctual'. Late morning, known as *Onyango* (with the corresponding names *Onyango* and *Anyango*), completes the cycle.

The fact that Luo dispositions to quotidian time reckoning have not yet been transformed by the commoditized hourly clock-time system of capitalism (cf. Thompson 1967; O'Malley 1990) does not mean that they lack an abstract sense of the time required to complete various tasks with different amounts of labor. Moreover, they quite clearly make temporal evaluations about being 'on time' (*mondo*) or 'late' (*deko*, *lewo*) and of being 'slow' (*mamos*) or 'fast' (*mapiyo*) at performing activities; and most activities (e.g. eating different meals, working in fields, cooking, going to market, sleeping) clearly have an 'appropriate' time. The difference between Luo quotidian time reckoning and Western hour-time is not so much one of lacking abstract units of measure, but rather of having units of less uniform and greater temporal length which are calibrated on the basis of the cyclical natural phenomenon of the position of the sun and moon. Luo quotidian time is thus 'apparent' time rather than homogenized 'mean' time derived from a mechanical chronometer (see O'Malley 1990), but the units are no less abstract or arbitrary. A more important difference is the absence of a link between Luo time-units and a conception of labor-time as a commodity. Therefore, time reckoning has not yet served as a vehicle for

the transformation of dispositions towards all activities as commoditized entities with convertible values.

Seasonal cycle

The Luo also recognize a longer 'natural' temporal cycle: a regular seasonal cycle based upon weather patterns (essentially rainfall) which structures agricultural activities, crop processing, house construction, craft production, diet, and other such things. This seasonal cycle and the shorter periods of associated activities determined by it serve to reckon the passage of time throughout the cyclical unit of the year (*higa*). In the absence of wide acceptance of an imported Western monthly calendar system, events during the yearly cycle tend to be indicated by reference to these cyclical phases (e.g. 'during the period of long rains', or 'during the period of weeding', or 'at the time of seasonal hunger before the first harvest').

It should be noted that, unlike a calendar, this cycle is not uniform in terms of number of days. Nor is it uniform for all Luo because variations in elevation result in different weather patterns in different zones of the basin which constitutes Luo territory. For those living at low elevation close to the shore of the Winam Gulf, the year is divided into a rainy season (*chwiri*) and a dry season (*keyo*). For those living in the hills which constitute the outer boundary of the basin, the year is divided into periods of long rains (*chwiri*) and short rains (*opon*) separated by two dry seasons (*keyo* and *oro*). For those living between the two, the short rains are an occasional but not predictable phenomenon. Each of these patterns tends to have a different cycle of agricultural activities associated with it (e.g. a second maize crop during *opon*).

Once again, personal names are used to link individual identity to these temporal constructs. For example, a girl born during the harvest season may be called *Akeyo*, while a boy born during the weeding period may be called *Odoyo*.

Weekly cycle

Though not 'traditional', cyclical intervals of an arbitrary duration between these two cycles are now also recognized: these are weeks with named days. This concept of reckoning time is largely a result of several processes which occurred during the period of colonial administration, including the development of regular periodic markets with weekly or bi-weekly cycles (Dietler 1986; Hay 1972), the spread of Christian religions with weekly cycles of days of worship, and the imposition of government temporal systems through control of markets and instruction in schools. The names for the week and its days clearly reflect the foreign origin of this temporal scheme: Sunday (*Juma pili*) is adopted from Kiswahili as is the term for week (*juma*), while other days are simply known by number (e.g. Friday is called *Tichabich*, 'day five'). Occasionally these weekly cycles conflict with each other, as in areas in south Nyanza where the Seventh Day Adventist church is well established and where it is necessary to specify, for example, whether one

means 'government Friday' or 'SDA Friday' (these fall on different days because each type of week is considered to begin on a different day).

Structural cycles

Other cyclical conceptions of time fall roughly under what Evans-Pritchard (1940: 94–108) called 'structural time'. These temporal modes include what might be called 'life-cycle time', 'generational time', and 'ritualized sequential time'.

Except for the recent generation taught in school, age is reckoned not in years but in terms of life-cycle stages. The Luo do not have a system of formal age-sets or age-grades, but rather a conception of idealized life-cycle stages through which individuals pass over the course of their lives. These stages are reckoned on the basis of both biological ontogeny and changes in social status, and each stage has expectations of appropriate gender-specific behavior. Some changes between stages are explicitly marked as events by ritual performances (e.g. marriage, widowhood), while other changes are marked simply by a gradual assumption of the symbols or behavior of a new status (e.g. girls at the age of courting, women after menopause). Thus, the age of a person may be characterized as, for example, 'her breasts are coming out', or 'he is beginning to have girlfriends', or 'she is a married woman', or 'he is an elder'. In order to calculate the age of a person as the passage of a specific amount of time (as is necessary for government identity cards or anthropologists estimating age in years), past life-cycle stages will be linked to historical events by the process which is used to reckon biographical history (see the section below on 'biographical time').

'Generational time' is extremely important as a means of reckoning both history and personal identity. Upon meeting another person, it is immediately invoked as a statement of identity and it serves to establish social distance between individuals, with all of the associated rights and expectations. The distant past (*machon*) is conceived of as the history of the cyclical process of successive segmentation of lineages from a common Luo ancestor (*Ramogi*) resulting in a dendritic system of connections among all Luo lineages. This process is perceived in personalized, anecdotal terms as the story of sporadic splits between sons of a common father; and these segmentation events serve to establish sequence while duration is reckoned in generations.² Hence, membership in a current lineage implies a specific social distance from all other Luo lineages which is calculated on the basis of the temporal distance of the segmentation event which resulted in their separation. This temporal/social distance has practical significance in structuring personal interaction, as it determines whom one can marry, where one can expect political allies, with whom one is expected to share, whose funerals one must attend (and where one will sit at those funerals), where one has rights to land, and a host of other such things. In a very real sense, for the Luo, history is an active force shaping the present.

Generational time also structures relationships between individuals within lineages or lineage segments. For example, two males of identical chronological age may stand in the relationship of either 'brothers' or of 'father' and 'son', depending upon the temporal depth of their genealogical connection. This structural relationship will have a great deal to

do with the behavior considered appropriate between the two and will have much more to do with determining seniority than the relative times of birth.

We employ the term '*ritualized sequential time*' to indicate another cyclical manifestation of time: the use of temporal sequences of action to structure social relations symbolically. This practice is a pervasive feature of Luo life found in a wide variety of contexts, and it is closely linked with the use of space for similar purposes (see Herbich and Dietler, in press).

As noted earlier, the Luo have traditionally had an acephalous political structure with an egalitarian political ethos. For example, there is no priestly class or other rulers who are able to exert control through manipulation of calendrical secret knowledge or seasonal ritual. However, relations of authority certainly exist, and they are structured by the principle of seniority. Seniority is really a sequential temporal concept transformed into a social relationship. In Luo society relations of seniority are continually evoked, reiterated, and naturalized in ritual and quotidian practice, including, particularly, ritualized temporal sequences of action.

For example, within each polygynous homestead, the first wife occupies a position of seniority and authority over other women. This authority is evoked by the position of her house and the fact that it must be the first house built, after that of the husband (Herbich and Dietler, in press), but also by the fact that she must continually initiate a number of sequences of activity for the homestead at large. Each year, the first wife must be the first woman in her homestead to sow her crops, and no others can begin until she does. Thus, although the seasons are seen to be the result of 'natural' cycles, the periods of activity associated with them must be initiated by appropriate human agency carried out in the proper sequence. Among many other initiatives, the first wife must also be the first to begin harvesting and the first to begin brewing beer from the new crop. Likewise, as a widow the first wife must be the first to undergo the ritual mating (*lago*) with a brother of the husband which signifies the end of mourning. Until she does this, no repair can be done on the roofs of any of the houses in the homestead.

Similar evocations of seniority may be seen in the sequence of marriageability for sons of a homestead, such that the most senior son (first son of the first wife) must marry first and establish his own house in the homestead before other sons may follow suit and move out of the house in which unmarried sons live together (*simba*). The senior son must also be the first to initiate agricultural activities in the abandoned homestead of his dead parents. Generational seniority is also evoked through such practices. For example, the father and mother of a man must sleep together the night before their son's marriage is consummated. The life-cycle of a homestead offers a similar example: a newly married man must build his first house in the homestead of his father, and must move out and establish his own homestead when his own children are ready to marry. A variety of similar rules exist governing complex temporal sequences, such as the order in which individuals may enter the gate of a new homestead, the ritual activities and construction order which must be followed in founding a new homestead (Herbich and Dietler, in press), and even the serving of beer (Herbich 1991).

Failure to observe these rules of temporal ordering is believed to result in severe supernatural sanctions, including death or infertility, which are not only personal but spread through families (again, according to degree of closeness reckoned through

genealogical seniority). Misfortune is most often explained as a violation of the proper sequence in some activity. For example, the death of one woman was explained as the result of her having brewed and served beer before the first wife of her homestead had done so. The death of another man was attributed to the fact that his younger brother had married before he did. In one case a man lived alone in his new homestead for months (with his wives passing his cooked food over the fence) because his first wife was ritually prohibited from entering the gate before she had completed another prerequisite activity that required the presence of a person who was away from home. This pervasive structuring of action through ritual sequences of time has the effect of shaping dispositions toward seniority and authority and naturalizing the social relations which underlie them. By linking structures of authority to the 'natural' passage of time, and experiencing the evocation of authority in the continual repetition of ritualized sequences, such structures appear as eternal and ineluctable.

Sequences of ritual action also create a sense of temporal duration which may serve to establish and maintain social relationships linking individuals or families. For example, the protracted series of wedding ceremonies, including the presentation of gifts and counter-gifts, use time as a means of creating the experience of mutual obligation and connection between families. As Bourdieu (1977: 4–5) has noted, the very concept of reciprocity relies upon a manipulation of the duration between sequential acts of giving. Duration may also be invoked to express differences in status symbolically. For example, female infants are kept in the house for three days after birth before being exposed to the sun, while male infants are kept indoors for four days; and throughout life this pattern is repeated in other practices such as the custom that, after a death in the family, females should not go into the agricultural fields for three days and males for four days (cf. Mboya 1938).

Historical time

History is conceived of as a cyclical unfolding of generations (as noted above), but also as a linear sequence of unique events. These events serve to anchor history in a framework of shared practical experience. Many kinds of events may serve as time-markers; what is essential is that they be in some sense remarkable and communally experienced. Natural disasters (especially famines and livestock epidemics) are by far the most frequent and prominent general time-markers, and every Luo has in memory a long series of such disasters stretching back to before his or her birth (personal experience overlapping with parents' tales). Famines (*kech*) of the past are known individually by name, usually a name derived from some peculiar characteristic of that famine. For example, *Keya* (a long and severe famine that occurred during the First World War) is named after the verb *keyo*, which means 'to scatter', because it forced families to scatter in different directions in search of food. After a slight amelioration in the harvest of 1918, famine returned in 1919; and this one was called *Chwe Kode* (meaning 'stay in it'). *Choka* (an earlier, short but extremely severe, famine of 1907) is named after the verb *choko*, which means to 'bring together', a reference to the fact that all the Luo were brought together because there was nowhere that had any food. *Nyangweso* (a famine of 1932) is named after the locusts which

caused the famine. The famine of 1980 was called *Mak nungo chuori*, which means ‘catch the waist of your husband’, a reference to the long lines in which people waited for maize flour to be distributed.

The list of such disasters is long, and famines such as *Ndanda*, *Nyakasiri*, and *Madara*, and the cattle epidemic of *Nduswe* date back to the turn of the century and earlier, before colonial records allow us to calculate a precise chronological date for them. The Luo way of dating them provides a good example of how they calculate historical duration as well as sequence. *Nyakasiri* was a famine during which the first money was introduced. These copper-coloured coins were called *Lando*, and women who were named after this money were said to be ‘mature’ (i.e. ready for marriage) by the First World War.

As this example suggests, the penetration of exotica from outside Luoland into local consciousness, such as the introduction of foreign objects or concepts is another source of marker events. For example, the introduction of coinage (and even of particular types of coins, such as *Lando*), the introduction of a system of metric weights, the first sighting of an airplane, and the European ‘World Wars’ (when Luo were conscripted into the military) are all events that serve as chronological markers allowing people to establish a relationship with other events or cycles (e.g. the founding of a market, an incident of warfare, a movement of people) and fix them in time. Both places and people are often linked to these events through names. For example, markets are sometimes named after a famine during which they were founded (e.g. *Nyangweso*). And one finds children with names such as ‘Kilo’ (after the introduction of metric weights), ‘Poda’ (after the introduction of soap powder), or ‘Pope’ (after the visit of the Pope to Kenya).

It is important to note that, although these time-markers are derived from shared experience, they are sometimes of local rather than universal relevance. Many famines were very widespread, but even widely experienced natural disasters often affected different areas within Luoland differently. Such events as livestock epidemics and famines caused by drought or locust devastation, struck some areas earlier than others, and in some cases certain areas escaped relatively unscathed; consequently, they may be known by different names in different areas.³ Sequential historical chronologies of this sort are, therefore, very local. However, people are generally aware of names and events in neighboring areas and capable of correlating events.

Because these time-markers depend upon the force of remembered experience, the further back into historical time one travels, the less closely history is linked to biographical time (see below), the less such time-markers continue to orient the passage of time, and the more history becomes a story of generational cycles marked by segmentation events and population movements (see Ogot 1967).

Biographical time

While the lives of people are seen to have a cyclical pattern of expected stages, the lives of individuals are reckoned as a linear progression of events. Sequence and duration in the unfolding of the story of individual lives is reckoned in a relational process that we call ‘biographical time’, through an articulation of cyclical structural patterns (especially life-cycle stages) with remembered time-marker events from linear historical time. As

chronometric reckoning in years is not a traditional practice, this usually involves a process of reckoning by a system very similar to the 'terminus post quem' and 'terminus ante quem' estimates employed by archaeologists.

For example, a woman placed the time of her marriage as shortly before a famine (*Nyangweso*) during which people ate the locusts which caused it. She remembered this particularly because, as a new bride expected to follow the practice of avoidance with proper 'shyness', she feared to be seen running after the locusts which were being caught by men such as her new father-in-law. Another might reckon the duration of time she lived in a particular homestead by noting that she married just before the rinderpest epidemic of *Nyabola* and that her husband died shortly after *hig origi* ('the year of the rings', when iron bracelets were introduced).

Calculating age is done in a similar fashion. For example, two old men comparing their relative ages might say that 'during the famine of *Keya* I had just begun to notice girls' or 'my six teeth were removed [a ritual practice for young boys] during the famine of *Choka*'. Oginga Odinga, the first vice-president of Kenya and a prominent political figure today, noted in his autobiography that he reckoned his birthdate by recalling that at the time he was just old enough to begin looking after the family's animals he remembered a man he knew wearing a khaki jumper with a red flap, and that the man later told him he had that jumper at the end of the First World War. He also remembered being left alone to care for his younger siblings while his mother left to search for food during the famine of *Keya*. His mother told him that he was born during the short rains, so he was able to place his birthdate at about October 1911 (1967: 4).

The year (*higa*) is used as a term of temporal reference (as in *hig ndege*, 'the year of the airplane') but generally not as a unit of counting. Temporal orientation depends on a process of personal association which can be wonderfully ingenious and intricate. This process of time reckoning provides both a means of anchoring personal biographies in historical time and a means of personalizing historical events.

Conclusion

This brief discussion of Luo conceptions of time is obviously insufficient to convey their true complexity and variety. Moreover, this single case cannot be extrapolated as a general model for prehistoric societies (although it may suggest some directions to explore for potential commonalities among societies, especially acephalous ones, operating without written calendars). Nevertheless, the Luo case does raise some points of interest for archaeologists.

In the first place, one may note that there are both differences and commonalities between the ways that archaeologists and the Luo perceive and reckon time. Like most archaeologists, the Luo clearly have a strong sense of historical time and process, as well as convictions about the importance of the past for the present. Although there is obviously a difference in respective models of causality and emphasis in the construction of historical narrative, the Luo believe that the present is a result of past action and events; and, in practice, present social relations are structured by a shared conceptualization of past history.

The Luo also share with archaeologists the need for an operational system of reckoning time which is capable of discerning its two essential aspects: sequence and duration. For the Luo, past and present time are not reckoned on a single homogeneous scale. Rather, they are linked through a relational system which articulates repetitive cyclical conceptions of different durations with linear sequences of events. Curiously, although archaeologists aspire to a homogeneous chronometric charting of the past, the way they are usually able to date sites in practice (the *bricolage* system of *termini post* and *ante quem* estimates based upon cross-dating with exotic objects, building and destruction levels, volcanic events, depositional sequences, and the like) usually ends up resembling much more the Luo method. Moreover, many of those catastrophic events which might be visible to archaeologists and serve as markers in their dating schemes are also likely to have been significant time-markers for the people who experienced them. As Shipton has noted, throughout Africa 'Famines are the hitching-posts of history' (1990: 375).

The fact that the Luo divide short-term duration into different units than we do and calibrate those units according to the solar and seasonal cycles rather than chronometers and calendars does not mean that they perceive duration in a significantly different way. As Bloch (1977: 282) noted for a parallel case, it simply means that 'they use different types of clocks from us'. However, the use of different types of clocks constitutes a different representation of time which may result in the structuring of practice according to different rhythms, and this may entail differences in the social meaning of time.

Perhaps the most significant observation of relevance in this connection is the specific way that temporal perceptions and experience permeate and structure all aspects of Luo life. For example, models of reckoning history structure the perception of present social distance, and personal identity is linked to the units and events by which temporal duration is oriented. Moreover, ritualized sequences of action underlie and continually reiterate the structure of Luo dispositions toward authority. In these ways, Luo dispositions toward time structure the rhythms of daily practice and, through the habituation of the body, practice serves to reproduce and naturalize the structure of social relations (see Bourdieu 1977; Mauss 1936).

The reciprocal relationship between the perception and reckoning of time and the representation of social relations is something that must be acknowledged by archaeologists, even those who claim to be operating only at the scale of the *longue durée*. However, it is especially critical for archaeologists who must grapple with agency and intentionality in the pursuit of social analysis. Without critical reflection on such issues of temporality, problematic hidden assumptions about time are likely to undermine interpretation. The difficulties do not stem inherently from the use of homogeneous abstract temporal units to chart the past and determine when various events occurred. Most archaeologists are not, after all, sufficiently naive to believe that people in the past experienced time through the same units we use to measure it. Rather, difficulties arise through, for example, the uncritical acceptance of the hidden aspect of time-reckoning in capitalist societies: assumptions about the valuation of time and its relationship to intentionality.

Problems of this kind are likely to arise even (or perhaps especially) in contexts where the issue of time might seem peripheral. The analysis of 'style' in artefacts is a case in point. Material style is not the result of an instantaneous act of creation, but of a temporally extended process involving a series of decisions (see Dietler and Herbich, in press). Errors

may arise in interpreting those decisions from a failure to recognize that for the Luo (and for pre-capitalist societies of the past) time is not a commodity. When conceptions of convertible value are projected onto time in such cases, and a 'rational' economic intentionality is ascribed through the conversion of labor-time into 'cost' (e.g. Wobst 1977), the nature and meaning of material style may be seriously distorted. How one deals with intentionality in archaeology is, of course, always a difficult issue. This is even a major problem for the application of theories of practice or agency in ethnographic contexts: the issue being whether actors are motivated by short-term goals or long-term strategies (see Ortner 1984). What is clear in any case is that models based upon the conception of time as a commoditized convertible measure of value are inappropriate in most contexts of the past.

The Luo case demonstrates both the complexity of the ways that the passage of time is conceived of and reckoned in other societies and the critical importance that perceptions of time have in structuring and reproducing social relations. An appreciation of these features is critical to progress in the interpretation of past societies, despite the difficulties it poses. Bradley (1991) has offered a persuasive suggestion as to how archaeologists might go about penetrating such temporal systems of the past by exploring the relationship between ritual and quotidian representations of time. The Luo case indicates that the investigation of such articulations, coupled with an increasing attention to temporal issues in ethnoarchaeological research, may be extremely promising in furthering our understanding of social relations and processes in past societies.

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Notes

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- 2 These genealogical reckonings are, of course, not necessarily completely accurate. They are subject to compression, invention, and negotiation (e.g. see Blount 1975). However, agreement is remarkably consistent over wide areas.
- 3 The names we give here are those common to the territory of Alego in Siaya District. Names for the same famines are often different in other areas (e.g. see Hay 1972).

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Abstract

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Living on Luo time: reckoning sequence, duration, history, and biography in a rural African society

Some reflections on the reckoning of time among the Luo people of western Kenya are offered as a contribution to the evolving discussion on differences in the ways that time is conceptualized by archaeologists and by the people who are the subjects of archaeological research. In particular, the paper examines the ways that the passage of time is conceived of and represented in a society which has not yet been entirely converted to the conceptions of temporality that underlie Western capitalist societies (and the academic disciplines which are a part of them), as well as offering some observations about potential ramifications for archaeological interpretation. Luo time-reckoning is shown to be a relational process in which cyclical and linear conceptions of time are articulated to discern sequence and duration, and temporality is shown to be a pervasive feature of representations of social relations and identity.