Studio Wā

Time Vocabularies

A living collection of temporal terms, frameworks, and systems across traditions, languages, and civilizational scales.

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01 About this listing

Words are spells. Thoughts are things.

The concepts we carry for time are not neutral containers. They are inherited architectures.

Monochronic time — clock time, linear time, the time of schedules and deadlines — is not the only account of what time is. It is one account, rooted in specific histories and economic arrangements, that became a global default. This vocabulary is not here to give you information to memorize. It is here to shatter the ceiling of your own assumptions about what time is, and to show you that those assumptions have always had a name. The word you reach for first is already a worldview.

The listing uses three organizing categories: *Temporal Terms*, *Temporal Frameworks*, and *Temporal Systems*. A term encodes what a civilization believes time fundamentally is — the word itself carries the worldview. A framework is an organized way of structuring the relationship to time socially, relationally, or politically. A system is a living practice: a calendar, a ceremony, a method of tracking and moving through time.

The structure has limits worth naming. In traditions where time, land, ceremony, and community are genuinely integrated, the distinctions between term, framework, and system become somewhat artificial — a Western analytical move applied to things that were never separate. The Hawaiian word *wā* encodes a worldview so complete it nearly describes an entire system. The Kaulana Mahina is a nested system, but it only makes full sense within the seasons, the stars, the land, and the ceremony surrounding it. The reason the full Hawaiian temporal practice has no single name is not a gap in the record. It is a signal: the people living an integrated system do not need to step outside it to name it. The culture is the system.

By contrast, the Gregorian calendar and UTC have names precisely because they are external tools — constructed and imposed apart from the people who use them. Not all temporal systems have equal depth. That difference is visible here, and it is worth sitting with.

02

Temporal Terms

The root words.

Each term encodes what its civilization believes time fundamentally is. The word and the worldview are the same thing.

Wā

ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi

The dictionary defines wā as: time; a period of time; an interval; the space between; a pause.

It is also the word for an era. In the Kumulipo, a Hawaiian creation chant, wā names the great epochs through which life moved from darkness into form: Wā ʻekahi, Wā ʻelua, the first era, the second. What makes wā a holistic word is this: in Hawaiian thought, time and place are not separate. When you are and where you are ask the same question. The interval between things, between tides, between generations, between words, is not empty space. It is wā: relational, charged, holding what came before and calling forward what comes next.

The other terms in this listing each name something wā already holds. Chronos, kairos, zamān, ma, shí: each one illuminates a facet. But wā moves into something none of them reach, a time that is inseparable from land, from ancestry, from the living. It is the reason this studio carries its name.

Time · Temporal

English · Latin

In English, time is a noun. It can be spent, saved, wasted, bought, killed, and lost. That commodity grammar — time as a finite resource you possess and deplete — is not neutral. It encodes a specific cultural assumption: that time is a thing, separable from the person experiencing it, measurable and transferable.

Temporal, from Latin *temporalis* (from *tempus*, time), is an adjective. It names a quality or a relationship rather than a thing you hold. This is why we say temporal diversity, not time diversity. The adjective opens space the noun closes. This vocabulary begins here: with the word you already reach for, and what it already assumes.

Chronos

Ancient Greek

Chronos is sequential, measurable time — the time of clocks, calendars, and deadlines. It asks: how long? How many minutes, hours, years? It does not know what kind of moment it is. It knows only that the moment has occurred and been counted.

Chronos is not wrong. It is a real account of one dimension of temporal experience. What becomes a problem is when chronos becomes the only account — when measured duration crowds out quality, season, and readiness.

Kairos

Ancient Greek

Kairos is the opportune moment: the right time, the ripe time, the time that calls for a specific action. In ancient rhetoric, kairos named the quality of a moment that made one argument and not another the appropriate one. In theology, it is the time of divine intervention. In practice, it is the difference between speaking too soon, too late, and exactly when it matters.

Kairos cannot be scheduled. It can only be recognized. Cultivating that recognition is central to Studio Wā's work.

Aion

Ancient Greek

Where chronos is sequential and kairos is qualitative, aion is eternal time: the unending, the ever-present, the time that does not pass because it encompasses all passing. In Stoic and Platonic thought, aion is the time of the cosmos — the cycle that holds all smaller cycles. It gives us the word "eon": an age so vast that duration loses its grip on it.

Tempus fugit

Latin

"Time flies." From Virgil's *Georgics* (29 BCE): *sed fugit interea, fugit irreparabile tempus* — "but meanwhile it flees, irretrievable time flees." The phrase encodes a specifically Latin anxiety about time's irreversibility and the urgency of action before opportunity closes. It is the Roman cousin of kairos, inflected with loss rather than readiness. As a term, it reveals something the others don't: how a civilization *feels* about time, not just how it names it.

Ma

Japanese

間

Ma (間) is the Japanese concept of negative space in time: the pause, the silence, the interval between notes in music, between words in conversation, between rooms in a house. *Ma* is not absence. It is presence of a different quality — the moment of potential before form is resolved.

In Japanese aesthetics, the most carefully considered element is often the space between objects, not the objects themselves. *Ma* carries this into time: an interval whose meaning equals or exceeds what surrounds it.

Zamān

Arabic

زمان

Zamān (زمان) is the Arabic word for time in its broadest sense: age, era, epoch, the long duration within which events occur. In Islamic philosophy, whether zamān is created or eternal was a fiercely contested question. Al-Ghazali argued it was brought into being by God along with the universe. Ibn Rushd (Averroes) disputed this directly, defending the Aristotelian position that time has no beginning. Their exchange is one of the great sustained debates in medieval Islamic thought.

Waqt

Arabic

وقت

Where zamān is duration, waqt (وقت) is the specific moment: the appointed time, the instant fixed for prayer or action. In Sufi tradition, waqt is elevated further — the mystic's present moment, the only time that is real, the now in which union with the divine becomes possible. The Sufi practitioner lives entirely in the waqt. Together, zamān and waqt show a language holding both the longest and the shortest registers of time simultaneously.

Kāla

Sanskrit

Kāla is time in Sanskrit, encompassing both the measured time of the calendar and the vast cosmic time of the yugas. It is also the name of Yama, the god of death — because time and death arrive together. In the Bhagavad Gita (11.32), Krishna reveals himself as kāla, destroyer of worlds: time not as a container for events, but as an active force that consumes everything within it.

Kalpa

Sanskrit · Hindu cosmology

A kalpa is one day in the life of Brahma — approximately 4.32 billion years in human terms. It is the fundamental unit of cosmic time in Hindu cosmology, itself nested inside larger cycles. The scale is deliberate: to place human life within a kalpa is to radically reframe urgency. What feels like crisis at the human scale is, at the kalpa scale, barely a tremor. Kalpa and kāla together show Sanskrit temporal thought at both the human and the cosmic register — the consuming present and the inconceivable long arc.

Shí

Classical Chinese
時

Shí (時) is the Chinese character for time, season, and the right moment — held together in a single word. It carries the same insight that Greek separates into chronos and kairos: time has both duration and quality, and wisdom lies in knowing not only what time it is but what kind of time it is. The *I Ching* is organized around the reading of shí: which hexagram names the quality of this particular moment, and what it calls for.

03

Temporal Frameworks

How time is organized.

Frameworks are the structures cultures build to orient themselves in time — socially, relationally, ecologically, politically.

Tā-Vā

Pacific — Tongan, Sāmoan, Māori

Tā-Vā is the Pacific relational framework in which time (tā, the mark, the beat) and space (vā, the interval, the relational gap) are inseparable dimensions of reality. Developed as a framework by Tongan philosopher ʻOkusitino Māhina, and engaged by Samoan writer Albert Wendt through the concept of *teu le vā* (nurturing the relational space), tā-vā has become a significant frame across Pacific scholarship.

Where chronos asks how long, tā-vā asks: what is the quality of the space between? Time, in this framework, is not the movement of things through space — it is the vibration between things. Mark and interval, pulse and pause, in perpetual relation.

Ubuntu

Nguni Bantu traditions · Southern Africa

Often translated "I am because we are," ubuntu is a philosophical orientation toward personhood as inherently relational. In temporal terms, this means time is never individual. A person is not located at a point in time but woven into a web of relation extending behind through ancestors and forward through descendants. Presence is not a solo event.

Ubuntu time is communal time: the time of relationship, obligation, and mutual recognition. Its rhythm is shaped by when people are ready together, not when a clock says begin.

Monochronic

Cross-cultural theory · Edward T. Hall, 1959

Monochronic time cultures organize life around one task at a time, in linear sequence, with schedules treated as commitments. Time is experienced as a finite resource — it can be spent, saved, or wasted. Work and relationship are kept separate. Interruption is disruption.

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall identified this pattern primarily in Northern European and North American business cultures. It is the temporal architecture most global institutions are built on — often without acknowledging that it is a cultural choice, not a natural law.

Polychronic

Cross-cultural theory · Edward T. Hall, 1959

Polychronic time cultures organize time around relationships, flexibility, and the coexistence of multiple activities at once. Interruption is relationship maintenance, not disruption. Responsiveness is valued over predictability. Relationship moves through everything.

Most Indigenous cultures, many Latin American, Arab, African, and South and Southeast Asian cultures practice forms of polychronic time that monochronic systems routinely misread as disorder. That misreading carries real professional and economic consequences for people operating across temporal cultures.

Sasa / Zamani

East African — Bantu language traditions · John Mbiti, 1969

Africa is a vast continent holding hundreds of distinct peoples, languages, and temporal traditions. This entry represents one: the framework named by Kenyan philosopher John Mbiti in *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969), drawn from Bantu language traditions across East Africa. It should not be read as descriptive of African time broadly.

In the traditions Mbiti documents, Sasa is the living present — the immediate past, now, and near future held together as an experienced whole. Zamani is the deep past: the domain of myth, origin, and ancestral presence. A person moves from Sasa into Zamani when the last living person who knew them personally also dies. Mbiti's framework has since been critiqued by African scholars for overgeneralizing across a continent of enormous diversity. The critique is valid and worth naming. What the framework offers, in its specific scope, is a serious account of how time holds the relationship between the living and the dead.

Ahupuaʻa

ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi · Hawaiian land and time

Ahupuaʻa is the traditional Hawaiian land division system running from mountain to sea, organizing communities around ecological cycles. As a temporal framework, it encodes the understanding that time is ecological: structured by rain, fish run, taro growth, and storm season rather than quarters or fiscal years.

To work within ahupuaʻa time is to be answerable to the land's rhythms. Human schedules are nested inside larger, non-negotiable natural ones. Studio Wā holds ahupuaʻa as an ancestral model for what temporal sovereignty can look like in practice.

Temporal sovereignty

Studio Wā framing

Temporal sovereignty is the capacity to know and inhabit your own time on your own terms. Not more efficient management within existing structures — but naming which temporal structures you choose to live by, understanding where they came from, and recovering or building the ones that align with your values, your body, and your community.

For Indigenous peoples, temporal sovereignty is inseparable from land sovereignty and cultural sovereignty. The suppression of lunar calendars, seasonal ceremonies, and ancestral timekeeping was not incidental to colonization. It was part of it.

Necessary labor

Studio Wā framing · after Marx · Federici

In political economy, necessary labor is the portion of a worker's time that reproduces their own subsistence — what must be done to survive before producing surplus for another. Studio Wā extends this: care work, cultural work, ceremony, rest, and creative practice are also necessary labors. They reproduce life in its fullest sense.

Scholar Silvia Federici's work on reproductive labor is central here: the enormous amount of human time capitalism renders invisible, unpaid, and outside the accounting of productivity. For Kānaka ʻŌiwi and other Indigenous peoples, this includes the labor of cultural memory, language transmission, and ceremony that holds a people across time.

04

Temporal Systems

Living practice.

Systems are the calendars, ceremonies, and timekeeping practices through which communities actually move through time — and have moved through time, across generations.

Kaulana Mahina

ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi · Hawaiian lunar calendar

The Kaulana Mahina is the Hawaiian lunar calendar: thirty named nights of the moon, each carrying specific guidance for agriculture, fishing, ceremony, and rest. Created in association with Hina, the goddess of the moon, each night has a name and a meaning — the waxing nights (*Hoʻonui*), the full nights (*Piha Poepoe*), the waning nights (*Hōʻemi*). The calendar begins with the first Hilo moon following the rising of Makaliʻi (the Pleiades) on the eastern horizon, which marks the changing of the seasons and the start of the four-month Makahiki period.

The Kaulana Mahina is a nested system within a larger integrated Hawaiian temporal practice that also includes the two great seasons — Kau (summer, dry) and Hoʻoilo (winter, rainy) — the movement of stars, tidal observation, and the daily rhythm of pō (night, the generative time) and ao (day, the manifest world). That larger practice has no single name. The people living it were not outside it, looking in. The culture was the system.

Cholq’ij

K’iche’ Maya · Mesoamerica

The Cholq’ij is the 260-day Maya sacred calendar, still in active use among K’iche’, Mam, and other Maya communities in Guatemala and southern Mexico. Each day carries a specific energetic signature — a combination of twenty named day signs and thirteen numbers — that gives it qualities no other day shares. The Cholq’ij does not move in a line. It spirals, cycling through its 260-day round in perpetual return, marking the time of ceremony, planting, birth, and divination.

The Cholq’ij is one nested system within the larger Maya temporal practice, which also includes the 365-day solar calendar (the Haab’), the Long Count for historical and cosmological time, and the Venus cycle. Together these produce a system of interlocking cycles of extraordinary precision and depth.

Moon-named months

Indigenous North America and beyond

Across many Indigenous nations of North America — and across many other cultures worldwide — the months of the year are named not by number or by Roman emperors, but by what the natural world is doing during that period: Moon When Geese Return, Moon of the Crusted Snow, Moon When Berries Are Ripe. These names are not decorative. They are ecological data encoded into the calendar and transmitted through it across generations.

Each nation names their moons for their own land, their own seasonal rhythms, their own relationships with the animals and plants of their territory. The names are not universal and should not be treated as interchangeable. What is shared is the practice itself: letting the land name the time, and letting the calendar carry ecological knowledge forward. This stands in direct contrast to calendar systems that impose an abstract numerical grid over the natural world without relation to it.

This vocabulary is alive.

If you work with a temporal concept that belongs here — in your language, your tradition, your practice — we want to hear from you. Studio Wā is building this field together.