

LIEPP Seminar 06/27/2025

Decolonizing Evaluation: From Theory to Practice

The Swahili Evaluation Approach: Made in Africa, Made from Proverbs

Dr Almas Fortunatus Mazigo

Senior Lecturer in Applied Ethics and Development Evaluation

Dar es Salaam University College of Education (DUCE)

University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), Tanzania

Email: mazigo.almas@udsm.ac.tz

Decolonizing and Indigenizing Evaluation Journey

- ❑ Recognition of the limitations of Euro-American evaluation paradigms, methods, and standards (especially Randomized Control Trials _RCTs) in assisting African people in conducting evaluations that matter
- ❑ This led to the call for **"Making Evaluation Our Own"** at AfrEA's 4th conference in Niamey, Niger, on 18 January 2007.
- ❑ Later, AfrEA adopted and promoted the "Made in Africa Evaluation research agenda" to develop evaluation theories, methodologies, frameworks, and approaches rooted in the philosophy, culture, and worldviews of African people.
- ❑ African proverbs ... are important sources of **evaluative wisdom and philosophy: guide how to measure, compare, inquire, deliberate and decide**
- ❑ Led the AfrEA-funded **"Searching Evaluative Insights in Swahili Proverbs"** project (2020 -2023) ...
- ❑ Collected **200 Swahili proverbs** ... Based on wisdom of **45 proverbs** to develop **philosophy of Evaluation and the Swahili Evaluation Approach**

Methodology for Extracting Evaluative Wisdom and Philosophy in Proverbs

- ❑ Proverbs can function as:
 - ✓ **Epistemological devices:** summarizing theories of knowledge, inquiry and learning;
 - ✓ **Moral texts:** articulating axiological commitments such as fairness, justice and collective responsibility;
 - ✓ **Philosophical statements:** reflecting beliefs about reality (ontology) and how to act in it (praxis);
 - ✓ **Methodological resources:** offering guidance on indicators, causality, stakeholder roles and evidence-based judgement.

Phase One: Identification and Thematic Grouping of Proverbs ...1

□ Theme 1: Social Participation and Stakeholder Engagement

Proverbs reflect indigenous understandings of **participation, responsibility, interdependence and collective agency**. They encode cultural expectations about **who should be involved in social processes and why**.

- ✓ Shughuli ni watu — "A social event needs people." This proverb emphasises participatory processes; **evaluation must involve those affected**.
- ✓ Usione vyaelea vimeundwa — "Don't just see things floating; someone built them." This proverb suggests that **outcomes are not spontaneous; participation and effort matter**.
- ✓ Kidole kimoja hakivunji chawa — "One finger cannot kill a louse." This proverb highlights the **limitations of individual effort; supports collaborative inquiry**.
- ✓ Mgeni njoo mwenyeji apone — "Let the guest come so the host may benefit." This proverb speaks to **mutual learning and reciprocal benefit** in stakeholder interactions.

Phase One: Identification and Thematic Grouping of Proverbs ...2

□ Theme 2: Knowledge, Evidence and Inquiry

Proverbs focused on learning, asking and identifying reliable signs. They reflect an indigenous empiricism—where knowledge emerges from attentiveness to context, signs and lived experience.

- ✓ Kuyliza si ujinga — “Asking is not foolish.” This proverb validates curiosity, dialogue, and knowledge-seeking behaviour.
- ✓ Dalili ya mvua ni mawingu — “The sign of rain is clouds.” This proverb emphasises pattern recognition and the value of indicators.
- ✓ Asiyauliza hanalo ajifunzalo — “He who does not ask learns nothing.” This proverb encourages questioning as a mode of knowledge acquisition.
- ✓ Panapofuka moshi pana moto — “Where there is smoke, there is fire.” This proverb advocates inferential reasoning; symptoms point to underlying causes.
- ✓ Kwenye mzoga ndipo wakusanyikapo tai — “Where there is a carcass, that is where vultures gather.” This proverb suggests evaluators must look at who is attracted to interventions and why—useful in assessing interests and unintended consequences.

Phase One: Identification and Thematic Grouping of Proverbs ...3

▣ Theme 3: Ethics, Judgement and Responsibility

Proverbs offer guidance on **fairness, responsibility, transparency and experiential knowledge**. They often carry **moral weight**, emphasising the evaluator's **duty to act ethically and justly**.

- ✓ Mlenga jiwe kundini hajui limpataye — "He who throws a stone into a crowd does not know whom it hits." This proverb warns **against careless assessments that harm unintended targets**.
- ✓ Kitanda usichokilalia hujui kunguni wake — "You can't know the bugs of a bed you haven't slept on." This proverb underscores the **necessity of lived experience before judgement**.
- ✓ Nyani haoni kundule — "The baboon does not see its own rear." This proverb points to **self-blindness; the importance of external perspectives in evaluation**.
- ✓ Adhabu ya kaburi aijua maiti — "The pain of the grave is known only to the dead." This proverb advocates for **privileging insider knowledge**—only those who lived the experience can speak to it truthfully.
- ✓ Maji usiyoyafika hujui kina chake — "You don't know the depth of water you haven't reached." This proverb **advises caution and humility in judgements**.

Phase Two: Extraction and Mapping of Evaluative Wisdom from Proverbs

- This phase involved a close, interpretive engagement with the selected proverbs to extract the **evaluative wisdom embedded within them**, and map that wisdom to the key domains of evaluation theory and practice.

- Each proverb was analysed for its relevance to four major evaluative dimensions:
 1. **Inquiry and learning** - How the proverb **informs or critiques processes of knowing and knowledge-seeking**.

 2. **Valuation and judgement** - How **worth, merit or performance** is conceptualised.

 3. **Stakeholder engagement and inclusivity** - Whose knowledge counts and how it is accessed or valued.

 4. **Ethical responsibility and accountability** - What moral norms guide inquiry, decision-making and action.

Phase Three: Generating Philosophical Insights for Grounding an Evaluation Approach

□ Drawing from Mertens and Wilson's (2019) evaluative philosophy, this phase interpreted proverb-based wisdom as a source of foundational beliefs about what should be evaluated, how it should be known, what values should guide the process, and how evaluation should be conducted.

1. **Ontological Beliefs:** The Nature of the Evaluand

Guiding question: What is the nature of the entity being evaluated?

2. **Epistemological Beliefs:** Ways of Knowing

Guiding question: How do we come to know the evaluand?

3. **Axiological Beliefs:** Ethics and Values in Evaluation

Guiding question: What ethical principles should guide evaluation?

4. **Methodological Beliefs:** Approaches to Inquiry and Judgement

Guiding question: What are the best tools and processes for conducting evaluation?

Developing a Philosophy of Evaluation ...1

1. Ontological Belief (Nature of the Evaluand)

- ❑ **Proverb Insight:** Nyumba usiyolala ndani huijui hila yake (You cannot know the defects of a house you have not slept in).
- ❑ The evaluand (project or program) is a single but multifaceted entity that must be understood through lived experiences.

2. Epistemological Belief (Ways of Knowing)

- ❑ **Proverb Insight:** Matundu ya nyumba ayafahamu mwenye nyumba (Only the house owner knows the holes in the house)
- ❑ Knowledge about the evaluand is generated through close, trusted relationships with people with direct experience.

Developing a Philosophy of Evaluation ...2

3. Axiological Belief (Ethics and Values)

- ❑ **Proverb Insight:** Shughuli ni watu (A social event needs people)
- ❑ Evaluation is a people-centered and social process that must be guided by respect, cooperation, and shared responsibility for the common good.

4. Methodological Belief (Credible Evidence and Inquiry)

- ❑ **Proverb Insight:** Aingiaye baharini huogelea (Whoever enters the sea must swim); Asiyauliza hanalo ajifunzalo (One who does not ask, does not learn)
- ❑ Credible information is generated through well-managed inquiry processes, co-learning, and co-validation of evidence.

✓ These **four elements** became the **philosophical foundation** of the Swahili Evaluation Approach (SEA)

Proverbs Elaborating on Evaluation Purposes

1. Determine Performance in Keeping Promises

□ **Proverb Insight:** Ahadi ni deni (A promise is like a debt)

2. Identifying Preventive and Corrective Measures

□ **Proverb Insight:** Hila ya kikwapa kunuka pasipo kidonda (The armpit's trick is smelling bad despite not having a wound)

3. Co-Learning and Co-Producing the History of Development Projects

□ **Proverb Insight:** Pekee pekee hauwezi tunga historia (One person cannot produce history)

✓ Developed the Swahili Evaluation Approach (SEA, comprising a robust philosophy of evaluation and methodological guidance for conducting evaluations.

Proverbial Wisdom in the Steps of Evaluations ... 1

- ❑ **Step 1. Stakeholder Identification & Engagement:** Identify people with direct experience with the project
 - ✓ **Proverb Insight:** Matundu ya nyumba ayafahamu mwenye nyumba ("The house owner knows the holes in the house")

- ❑ **Step 2. Define Purpose and Scope with stakeholders:** Clarify the Promises Made
 - ✓ **Proverb Insight:** Ahadi ni deni ("A promise is like a debt") ... Evaluate fulfillment of project's promises.

- ❑ **Step 3. Choose culturally appropriate methods and use Indigenous people's success or progress indicators.**
 - ✓ **Proverb Insight:** Dalili ya mvua ni mawingu ("The sign of rain is clouds")

Proverbial Wisdom in the Steps of Evaluations ... 2

- ❑ **Step 4. Collect data:** Engage stakeholders in questioning, reflection and discussing various aspects of the project.
 - ✓ **Proverb Insight:** Kuuliza si ujinga ("Asking is not foolish") --- **inquiries &** Nyani haoni kundule ("The ape does not see his own buttocks") --- **self-examination**

- ❑ **Step 5. Collaborate in analysis:** Involve Stakeholders in **Interpretation; Recognize Multiple Perspectives** and **Validate Findings** Through Local Wisdom
 - ✓ **Proverb Insight:** Haramu yako halali kwa mwenzio ("What is wrong for you may be right for someone else")

- ❑ **Step 6. Co-create the history:** Co-generate narratives highlighting successes and challenges.
 - ✓ **Proverb Insight:** Pekee pekee hauwezi tunga historia ("One person cannot produce history")

Proverbial Wisdom in the Steps of Evaluations ... 3

Step 7. Share findings transparently, and empower communities to take action based on evaluation insights.

- ✓ **Proverb Insight:** Mgeni njoo mwenyeji apone ("Let the guest come so that the host benefits")

Step 8. Apply Lessons and Ensure Accountability: Implement identified **preventive and corrective measures**

- ✓ **Proverb Insight:** Hila ya kikwapa kunuka pasipo kidonda ("The armpit's trick is smelling bad despite not having a wound")

Concluding Remarks

- ❑ Wisdom in Swahili proverbs provided **the content for the philosophy of evaluation**, which serves as the philosophical foundation of the Swahili Evaluation Approach.
- ❑ Wisdom in Swahili proverbs **provides guidance on executing a step-by-step, inclusive, and ethical evaluation** for the communities involved.
- ❑ Competent evaluators who learn and understand the established philosophy of evaluation and operational guidelines can **successfully facilitate people in conducting evaluations that matter to them**.

References

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