
Ubuntu and Afrofeminism for Decolonizing Evaluation

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Background: The African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) has been at the forefront of innovating the praxis of decolonizing evaluation, especially through Made in Africa evaluation (MAE) and related efforts. Still, there is a wealth of additional African epistemologies and philosophical paradigms which either have not been adequately discussed in the literature or have not yet made their way into the discourse and practice of MAE.

Purpose: The purpose of this conceptual paper is to propose a theoretical framework that can be used to further inform Indigenous and decolonizing evaluation approaches in African contexts and beyond. Specifically, we address the often-cited notion of Ubuntu, informed by African philosophical literature beyond the field of evaluation, and we propose Sylvia Tamale's decolonizing and Afrofeminist lens as a complementary philosophical framing with great potential applications in Indigenous and decolonizing evaluation in African contexts and beyond.

Setting: Not applicable.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: This conceptual study draws on philosophical literature from African philosophy and political science to weave together notions of Ubuntu with decolonizing Afrofeminism.

Data Collection and Analysis: Not applicable.

Findings: We propose that a decolonizing, Indigenous evaluation approach rooted in Ubuntu and Afrofeminism would question categorial, dichotomous, hierarchical logics (e.g., methodological hierarchical hegemonies); recognize masculinist, imperialist, modernist ideals inscribed in institutions (e.g., via government rationality, therefore also via evaluation); foreground intersectionality; and make room for "the moral economy" and other deeply communitarian framings.

Keywords: *Ubuntu; Afrofeminism; Made in Africa evaluation; decolonizing evaluation*

Introduction

African evaluation, particularly the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA), has been at the forefront of innovating the praxis of decolonizing evaluation, especially through Made in Africa evaluation (MAE) and related efforts (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021; Omosa et al., 2021). Still, there is a wealth of additional African epistemologies and philosophical paradigms which either have not been adequately discussed in the literature or have not yet made their way into the discourse and practice of MAE. As such, the purpose of this conceptual paper is to propose a theoretical framework that can be used to further inform Indigenous and decolonizing evaluation approaches in African contexts and beyond. Specifically, we address the often-cited notion of Ubuntu, informed by African philosophical literature beyond the field of evaluation, and we propose Sylvia Tamale's decolonizing and Afrofeminist lens as a complementary philosophical framing with great potential applications in Indigenous and decolonizing evaluation in African contexts and beyond. In other words, we seek to contribute to the discourse on MAE and decolonizing evaluation more broadly by adding Tamale's decolonizing and Afrofeminist perspectives related to Ubuntu to the ongoing uses of that concept within MAE. We propose that Tamale's contributions based on Ubuntu as framed through a decolonizing and Afrofeminist lens—at once paradigmatic and practical—can add value to the continuously evolving discourse and practice of MAE and decolonizing evaluation. In that vein, we conclude by suggesting some key takeaways and practical applications of the novel paradigmatic framings presented here.

Background: Made in Africa Evaluation and Beyond

The role of research in Indigenous struggles for social justice is a concept that Linda Tuhiwai Smith addresses in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012). The issues addressed often revolve around “methodologies, ethics, theoretical and discursive representations, emancipatory possibilities and power relations associated with researching marginalized and vulnerable communities” (p. 198). In similar fashion, Bagele Chilisa developed a postcolonial indigenous research paradigm that highlights Indigenous knowledge systems and forms of knowledge creation and how social science researchers can evocatively engage with these

(2012). Chilisa suggests an activist paradigm intended to liberate the ‘colonized other’ in systems of knowledge production and to discover methods to integrate Indigenous knowledge approaches and procedures into the global knowledge economy. A specific example of a struggle for social justice in research is the Maori people fighting against colonialism (Smith, 2012). Some scholars, such as Graham Smith, believe that theorizing the struggle from a framework of kaupapa Maori has delivered significant understandings about how transformation works and can benefit Indigenous communities (Smith, 2012). This echoes Paulo Freire's model of change, which argues that conscientization leads to action for struggle; when people learn to read the word (of injustice) and read the world of injustice, they will act against injustice (Lloyd, 1972).

In some ways, these Indigenous methods are related to culturally responsive evaluation (CRE), which itself is a robust theory base and conceptual framework to guide practice (Hood et al., 2015). Zulli and Frierson (2004) used culturally responsive design approaches to modify their procedures after discussions with stakeholders based on evidence collected during the early stages of a project. By using CRE, Frierson et al. (2002) sought to actively address and inquire as to the possible impacts of cultural responsiveness and cultural competence on the program they evaluated. More broadly, these approaches are often considered as part of the social justice branch of evaluation approaches. From an evaluation standpoint, social justice relies on marginalized groups' interrogations of and perspectives on systemic power structures through mixed methods to further social justice and human rights (Mertens, 2009). However, Chilisa and others (2021) have also discussed how Indigenous approaches could be their own rethinking of the classical evaluation tree.

According to Chilisa and colleagues (2017), the driving axiological characteristic of any paradigm with an Indigenous label is a decolonizing intention. To summarize their argument, decolonization is a critique of the dominance of Euro-Western language and thought. Conventional methods cannot easily obtain Indigenous knowledge embodied “in languages, proverbs, folktales, stories, songs, music, taboos, artifacts, cultural and lived experiences to envision new topics, themes, [I]ndigenous-centered conceptual frameworks, processes and categories of analysis” (Chilisa et al., 2017, p. 327). It is important to truly reflect theoretical, conceptual, and methodological frameworks derived from Indigenous knowledge, worldviews, philosophies and culture in general. Examples which form a solid foundation of

Indigenous literature are African oral traditions, self-praise, proverbs, and songs. These examples invite communities to dialogue with academicians for decolonization purposes, and they provide opportunities for the voices of the Indigenous people to be heard instead of those of researchers.

A number of evaluation scholars in Africa have demonstrated the need to customize the current model used in African evaluation. In his article, “Developing an Africa-Rooted Program Evaluation Approach,” Cloete (2016) argues that clarity, consensus, and adequately managing the differences between the dominant Western models of program evaluation and observed changes are needed in order to more appropriately manage evaluation in Africa. He also highlights that the evaluation agenda in Africa should adopt the concept of a more appropriate Africa-rooted program evaluation management model. The article proposes a coherent and dedicated implementation plan for the Bellagio report, noting the need to customize the evaluation model for the African continent rather than substituting the prevailing model (for more on the Bellagio report, see Chilisa, 2015).

Cloete and hers also claim that the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) and its member voluntary organizations for professional evaluation (VOPEs), such as the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA), can and should play an essential role in the customization process (Cloete, 2016). Likewise, Cloete (2016) and Wallis (2019) also argue in favor of customization of dominant evaluation models instead of total replacement of the latter. They maintain that it is essential to develop improved evaluation methods, including transdisciplinary, mixed-methods, and context-specific planning and evaluation. The approach is to transcend (without excluding) Western data-based approaches. These Western-based approaches would support the “development of transformative, trans-disciplinary, developmental, culturally and context specific and sensitive, mixed research and evaluation approaches, designs and methods” (Cloete & Auriacombe 2019, as cited in Wallis, 2019, p. 276). Through an African-made process based on the major principles of Ubuntu philosophy, Wallis argues for a new and inclusive theory of evaluation. Ubuntu is an African traditional ideology of justice and fairness based on the philosophies of humanness, communitarianism, solidarity and interdependence (Tamale, 2020). Ubuntu tells us that “communities and ecosystems are stronger and more resilient when they are more complex and interconnected” (Wallis, 2019, p. 276; see also Chilisa et al., 2015). Though not without its

detractors (i.e., Uwizeyimana, 2020), Ubuntu has emerged as a leading (pan-)African onto-epistemology to guide and manifest decolonizing and Indigenous evaluation and research in Africa.

In the remainder of this paper, we delve deeper into the notion of Ubuntu and present it alongside Tamale’s (2020) work on decolonization and Afrofeminism. Ubuntu is central to Tamale’s work. Tamale is a renowned African feminist, multidisciplinary scholar, and human rights activist. She is based at the school of law at Makerere University in Uganda, where she previously served as dean. While her work is not generally known within the field of evaluation, we posit that her frameworks have great potential to guide the wave of decolonizing and Indigenous evaluation praxis.

Of note, all theoretical traditions joined in this framework are “peripheral”—from across what Bonaventure de Sousa Santos (2014) calls the abyssal line. As such, this paper’s theories-in-use match its content, avoiding the ironic mismatch that sometimes occurs whereby, even when seeking to analyze Southern epistemologies, Euro-American framings maintain their hegemonic grip on the researcher; as Audrey Lorde (1984) famously wrote, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 112).

Tamale on Decolonization and Afrofeminism

A widely contested term with countless varying definitions, for Tamale the term “decolonization” refers to various processes of deconstructing colonial interpretations and analyses of the social world. In this way, in addition to the material aspects of decolonization, it is very much in line with Fanon’s discussions of the colonization of the mind in *The Wretched of the Earth*: “For the colonized, decolonization of the mind is really about returning to the annals of history to find ourselves, to become fluent in our cultural knowledge systems, to cultivate critical consciousness and to reclaim our humanity” (Tamale, 2020, p. 3). There is a need to address both the first (i.e., material) and second (i.e., epistemic) levels of coloniality. According to Tamale (2020), the second level of coloniality “was (and still is) much more insidious and dangerous,” operating in “subtle and ‘benign’ ways derived from the warped understanding of Africa’s historiography” (p. 35), including around gender.

Thus, it is imperative to “think in terms of ‘coloniality of power’ in order to understand that

the structures and hegemonies that facilitated and reinforced colonialism did not disappear with flag independence” (Tamale, 2020, p. 29). It follows, then, that hierarchical dimensions and categorizations of concepts should not be seen as separate systems of oppression, but rather “as integrated (or entangled) heterogeneous structural processes” (p. 29). Given that one major limitation within mainstream decolonial scholarship on Africa is gender, Tamale frames Afrofeminism as a key aspect of continued decolonization in Africa. In doing so, she helps us in evaluation problematize not only gender and gendered categories, but all categories and hierarchies, including methodological and epistemic ones.

In other words, as part of the colonial project, “Modernity organizes the world ontologically in terms of atomic, homogeneous, separable categories.... categorial, dichotomous, hierarchical logic [is] central to modern, colonial, capitalist thinking about race, gender, and sexuality” (Lugones, 2010, p. 742). For instance:

The dichotomous understanding of gender in terms of polarized, hierarchized identities (i.e., masculinity vs femininity) was imposed on the colonized through processes of colonialism. To put it differently, the political economy of gender relations between African women and men was totally altered by colonialism, engendering new structural drivers of inequities. (Tamale, 2020, p. 6)

Even the majority of gender and women’s studies scholarship in Africa remains narrow, siloed, technocratic, and ultimately neoliberal (Tamale, 2020). Institutions and processes such as statecraft and government rationality—and thus so much of the evaluation apparatus in African contexts—continue to reflect masculinist and imperialist ideals “that place the majority of citizens at the periphery of existence” (Tamale, 2020, p. 10). Symbolic gestures of inclusion within the context of neoliberal systems will not deliver freedom or justice. As Tamale writes:

The work of decolonization and decolonial rethinking must entail much more than Band-Aid approaches for such complex wounds as those left by our colonial histories, beginning with fully appreciating the structural, institutional and psychological linkages that still link Africa to Western neocolonial interests and exploitation. (p. 18)

Thus, from Tamale’s Afrofeminist work on decolonization, we have noted the following

principles: (1) addressing the coloniality of power linked to colonization of the mind; (2) problematizing categorial, dichotomous, hierarchical logics; and (3) resisting symbolic, technocratic, neoliberal Band-Aid approaches—approaches which are often inscribed in the government rationality of modernist institutions (such as many standard approaches to evaluation). These principles, while especially important when fostering feminist evaluation and research, are also more widely applicable across all struggles for better evaluation.

One central concept at the heart of Tamale’s philosophical framing is the notion of Ubuntu. On this topic, of significant salience for evaluation, Tamale (2020) discusses the term “moral economy,” which “links specific relationships and patterns of reciprocity of material subsistence with shared non-monetary values, and is usually contrasted with market- or self-serving materialism” (p. 12). This communitarianism, part of “the African cultural fingerprint,” which can be described as “a set of institutional and normative values governing the relationship between individuals, the society, and nature” shapes African ways of being and doing, whereby individuals are part of a unity that is interdependent and mutually beneficial (Tamale, 2020, p. 12). In his book *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, Mogobe Ramose positions Ubuntu as the wellspring flowing with African ontology and epistemology (Ramose, 1999, as cited in Tamale, 2020).

One final point from Tamale which is salient for current conversations about MAE, and decolonizing and Indigenous evaluation more broadly, is the need to avoid totalizing discourse, even (and especially) when resisting an exiting hegemony such as colonization. That is, “In revolting against Western ethnocentric false universalisations, we should be careful not to enshrine in their place equally false essentialisations of Africanity, which disenfranchise us from examining certain aspects of oppressive relations (whether gender, class or other group)” (Imam, 1997, p. 17).

Implications and Conclusions

So what, then, do these principles elucidated from Tamale’s decolonizing and Afrofeminist lens, by way of her use of the onto-epistemic philosophical concept of Ubuntu, mean for evaluation praxis? Where does this leave us, both in terms of building on and advancing the discourse of MAE in particular and in relation to the broader global

conversations about Indigenous and decolonizing approaches in evaluation? We propose that a decolonizing, Indigenous evaluation approach rooted in Ubuntu and Afrofeminism would question categorial, dichotomous, hierarchical logics (e.g., methodological hierarchical hegemonies); recognize masculinist, imperialist, modernist ideals inscribed in institutions (e.g., via government rationality, therefore also via evaluation); foreground intersectionality; and make room for “the moral economy” and other deeply communitarian framings. Chilisa (2012) points out that an important concept in Ubuntu is the notion of respect for self and others through consensus building. She further notes that, as evaluators, we can model this behavior by entering or creating community gathering spaces to allow consensus to be developed; to truly embody the notion of community in Ubuntu, we ought to recognize the hierarchical importance of speakers, yet still allow for every person to get an equal chance to speak up until some kind of agreement or group cohesion is reached.

We should also be mindful to avoid what Louw (1998) depicts as the confusion of outmoded and suspect cravings for an oppressive universal sameness, because true Ubuntu strongly considers plurality (Louw, 1998; Chilisa, 2012). While Ubuntu constitutes personhood through other persons, as Ubuntuists, we can also reach solidarity and consensus, and therefore reach alterity, autonomy, and cooperation (Louw, 1998; Chilisa, 2012). This approach can bring us to honor and respect particularity, individuality, and historicity by embracing the perception of “the other in his [sic] otherness, in his [sic] uniqueness, without letting him [sic] slip into the distance” (Louw, 1998, p. 38; Chilisa, 2012). In other words, in the Ubuntu philosophy, perceptions of the other must be adjustable and open-ended, not rigidly closed (Chilisa, 2012). In practice, on a more micro level, this would entail using a plurality of types of evidence to make and justify evaluative claims, while on a macro level, it helps avoid either-or thinking about the relationship between MAE and more standard approaches to evaluation practice in Africa. Thus, these approaches, gleaned from a deeper study of the Ubuntu notion, plus insights from Afrofeminism, show great promise to advance a liberatory praxis of decolonizing Indigenous evaluation. They build on and add to current discussions of Ubuntu in MAE and demonstrate how principles from decolonizing Afrofeminist thought can be practically applied in evaluation praxis.

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