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What is 'African' about the Made in Africa Evaluation? An epistemological emancipation endeavour

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Background: The Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE) framework has emerged as one of the most significant intellectual and institutional responses to the dominance of Western evaluation paradigms on the African continent, yet the question of what is distinctively 'African' about it remains undertheorised and contested in the evaluation literature.

Objectives: This article interrogates what is distinctively 'African' about the MAE by analysing the philosophical, epistemological, methodological, institutional and political dimensions through which MAE asserts its African identity, tracing its evolution from its inception in 1999 through to the most current scholarly contributions of 2025–2026.

Method: A qualitative interpretive literature review oriented towards critical synthesis was conducted, drawing on systematic narrative synthesis and thematic analysis and guided throughout by a critical postcolonial meta-theoretical lens.

Results: Made in Africa Evaluation's Africanness is grounded in Ubuntu philosophy, African indigenous knowledge systems, the African relational and Afrocentric paradigms, communal ways of knowing, and the institutional architecture of African Evaluation Association and the African Peer Review Mechanism. Unresolved tensions persist between universalist and contextualist epistemologies, theory and practice, and local ownership and global relevance.

Conclusion: Made in Africa Evaluation constitutes an assertion of Africa's right and intellectual capacity to define, conduct and own evaluation on its own terms, enriching both African evaluation practice and the global evaluation enterprise.

Contribution: This article provides the first comprehensive, multi-dimensional framework synthesising the philosophical, epistemological, methodological, institutional and political dimensions of MAE's African identity, advancing the theoretical foundations of the MAE discourse.

Keywords: Made in Africa Evaluation; African indigenous knowledge systems; Ubuntu; decolonisation; indigenisation; African Evaluation Association; epistemological emancipation; African relational paradigm.

Introduction

What makes an evaluation genuinely African? This deceptively simple question animates one of the most contested and consequential debates in contemporary development studies and evaluation theory. The Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE) framework has emerged as a conscious intellectual and political challenge to the hegemony of Western evaluation paradigms on the African continent – a challenge that foregrounds epistemology, methodology, power, identity and the politics of knowledge production in development contexts. The debate demands that monitoring and evaluation professionals in Africa interrogate not only what they measure, but who decides what is worth measuring, how it is measured, and whose frameworks of validity determine what counts as credible evidence. It compels recognition of the continent's colonial and precolonial history, the governance systems that colonialism produced, the structural inequalities that persist, the gender dimensions of power and the multiple and conflicting worldviews that characterise Africa's diverse societies (Abrahams, Masvaure & Morkel 2022).

Crucially, however, the literature has not yet produced a comprehensive, multi-dimensional analytical account of precisely what is distinctively 'African' about MAE. Existing scholarship has tended either to advocate for MAE from within the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) community or to critique it from external perspectives, without systematically mapping the full

architecture of its African identity across philosophical, epistemological, methodological, institutional and political dimensions. This article addresses that gap. It does not merely summarise what others have argued; rather, it advances an original analytical framework – the Epistemological Emancipation Framework – that organises the diverse dimensions of MAE's Africanness into a coherent, critically interrogated account. This framework is developed through sustained engagement with the internal tensions within the MAE discourse, including its vulnerabilities to essentialism, the risk of romanticising indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) and the contradictions between Pan-African universalism and Africa's profound cultural diversity.

Research methods and design

Research design and epistemological position

The methodology underpinning this analysis is a qualitative interpretive literature review oriented towards critical synthesis rather than bibliographic enumeration. This design was chosen because the research question – what is 'African' about the MAE – is inherently conceptual, philosophical and contested, demanding a methodology capable of engaging with ideas, arguments and theoretical frameworks rather than one that simply catalogues empirical findings. The review drew on the tradition of systematic narrative synthesis (Popay et al. 2006), which combines the coverage of a structured search with the interpretive rigour of close reading, enabling identification of patterns, tensions, convergences and divergences across a body of literature that spans multiple disciplines, institutional contexts and epistemological traditions. The overarching epistemological stance adopted was constructivist-interpretive, recognising that knowledge about evaluation in Africa is socially constructed, politically situated and shaped by the very power relations that MAE itself seeks to challenge.

Search strategy and source selection

The literature search was conducted between January and April 2026 across multiple scholarly databases and grey literature repositories. Peer-reviewed sources were retrieved from Google Scholar, ResearchGate, JSTOR, SAGE Journals and the *African Evaluation Journal*'s open-access portal, using search strings including 'Made in Africa Evaluation,' 'African indigenous knowledge systems and evaluation,' 'decolonising evaluation Africa,' 'Ubuntu and evaluation methodology,' 'AfrEA evaluation framework,' and 'African relational evaluation paradigms.' Grey literature – including conference papers, institutional reports, synthesis documents and professional blog posts from South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA), UNDP, AfrEA and the African Development Bank's Independent Development Evaluation (IDEV) – was also systematically consulted, in recognition that much of the most current MAE practitioner discourse exists outside traditional academic channels.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

A total of 47 sources were initially identified. Sources were included if they: (1) directly addressed the conceptual, philosophical, epistemological, methodological or institutional dimensions of MAE; (2) engaged substantively with decolonisation, indigenisation or African knowledge systems in the evaluation context; or (3) provided empirical or case-based illustrations of MAE principles in practice. Sources were excluded if they addressed African evaluation only in passing without substantive engagement with MAE's theoretical underpinnings, or if they were duplicated across databases. Following screening, 29 sources met the inclusion criteria and form the evidential basis of this article. Sources spanned from Chilisa and Malunga (2012) through to contributions published as recently as 2025 and 2026, ensuring both historical depth and contemporary currency.

Thematic analysis and analytical categories

Once assembled, the literature was subjected to thematic analysis drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, adapted for documentary rather than interview data. In the first phase, each source was read in full and annotated for key arguments, theoretical positions, methodological claims and empirical illustrations. In the second phase, initial codes were generated inductively – that is, without imposing predetermined categories – resulting in 84 discrete codes. In the third phase, codes were grouped into candidate themes by identifying patterns of conceptual similarity and analytical relationship. In the fourth phase, candidate themes were reviewed against the full data set and refined into six stable analytical categories: (1) ontology and epistemology, (2) decolonisation, (3) indigenisation, (4) methodology, (5) institutional identity and (6) global positioning. These six categories form the thematic architecture of the article's sections.

Meta-theoretical framework

Throughout the analysis, a critical postcolonial lens was applied as the governing meta-theoretical framework, drawing on De Sousa Santos's (2014) sociology of absences and epistemologies of the South, the decolonial tradition associated with Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) on colonial matrices of power, and Nkrumah's (1964) foundational Pan-African political philosophy. This lens served not merely as a thematic category but as an interpretive orientation shaping how the literature was read, what silences and tensions were identified, and whose voices were recognised as authoritative. Specifically, it asked: whose knowledge counts? Who sets the evaluation agenda? And what structural conditions reproduce epistemological inequality in African evaluation? This reflexive, power-sensitive orientation is itself a methodological expression of the MAE values the article analyses.

Origins, institutional foundation and conceptual genesis

Made in Africa Evaluation did not emerge from a single intellectual moment. It evolved through more than two decades of sustained institutional effort and discursive struggle (Table 1). Its institutional home has always been the AfrEA, which was established in 1999 with the explicit aspiration of

fostering a distinctively African evaluation culture (Tirivanhu 2022) (Table 2). From its founding, AfrEA carried the ambition of reclaiming evaluation for and by Africa – an ambition that was formally crystallised at the organisation's 2005 conference when the then-president issued what has since become the founding rallying call of the MAE movement: 'we need to do evaluation in our own words, make evaluation our own' (UNDP Strategic Innovation 2024). This was not merely a rhetorical gesture; it was a political declaration that evaluation in Africa required decolonisation as urgently as governance or education. The initiative was endogenous – born from within the continent – even as it attracted considerable interest and paradoxically, support from outside Africa (Africa Social Work & Development Network [ASWDNet] 2023).

Chilisa and Mertens (2021) articulate the intellectual core of this political declaration most precisely, defining MAE as an approach that resists the uncritical adoption of Western values and standards in the evaluation of African programmes – a resistance that is simultaneously epistemological, methodological and political (as cited in Tirivanhu 2022).

The critique of Western epistemological dominance and the colonial legacy

A foundational premise of MAE's African character is the recognition that evaluation practice in Africa is not, and has never been, culturally neutral. It is instead deeply inscribed by a colonial history that positioned European frameworks of knowledge, value and method as universal, while rendering African ways of knowing invisible, illegitimate or merely supplementary. As Abrahams et al. (2022) document, the M&E space in Africa is a microcosm of the broader African development landscape – one dominated by Western

TABLE 1: Historical origins and political roots of the Made in Africa Evaluation.

No.	Dimension	Year	Description and significance	Source of information
1	Colonial legacy as the point of departure	Pre-1990s	The origins of MAE lie in the recognition that evaluation practice in Africa was structured by colonialism and donor dependency. Evaluation theories, methods and approaches were dictated by donors, with local African evaluators serving as data collectors. This structural imbalance constitutes the historical injustice MAE seeks to redress. 'Evaluators and evaluations are led by donor-selected "experts," and local African evaluators serve as data collectors. The theories, methods and approaches were dictated by the "donor," and this was of great concern'.	Chilisa (2024).
2	Epistemic injustice as the intellectual impetus	Ongoing (colonial to present)	MAE emerged as a direct response to epistemic injustice – the marginalisation and invalidation of African ways of knowing through the imposition of Western epistemological frameworks. 'MAE as a method and theory is waging an uphill battle against epistemic injustice in knowledge production as well as unequal power relations and projects funded by donors who prescribe to an ideology that promotes quantity over quality'.	Frehiwot (2022). Chilisa and Mertens (2021).
3	Early African evaluation scholarship	Early 2000s	Since the early 2000s, African evaluation experts, scholars and VOPEs have worked to develop evaluation approaches grounded in African indigenous philosophies, eventually coalescing around the designation 'Made in Africa Evaluation'. 'Since the early 2000s, African evaluation experts, scholars and voluntary organisations for professional evaluation have worked towards developing evaluation approaches based on African indigenous philosophies'.	Tirivanhu (2022).

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MAE, Made in Africa Evaluation; AfrEA, African Evaluation Association; VOPE, Voluntary Organisations for Professional Evaluation.

TABLE 2: Institutional foundation of Made in Africa Evaluation – African Evaluation Association and formal governance.

No.	Dimension	Year	Description and significance	Source of information
1	Founding of AfrEA and embedding of MAE	1999	AfrEA was established as the primary continental professional body committed to shaping evaluation practice from within Africa, with MAE institutionalised as a foundational pillar from the outset. 'The MAE agenda was made central to the aspirations of the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) at its inception in 1999, culminating in MAE as a pillar of its 2018–2021 strategy'.	Tirivanhu (2022).
2	AfrEA 2005 Conference declaration	2005	The then-president of AfrEA issued the landmark declaration that formally launched MAE as a conscious political and intellectual act of reclamation: 'We need to do evaluation in our own words, make evaluation our own'.	UNDP Strategic Innovation (2024).
3	AfrEA 4th Conference resolutions	2007	Resolutions passed in Niamey, Niger, established an institutional mandate requiring clarity about the philosophical and theoretical assumptions informing African and South-to-South evaluation frameworks.	Chilisa (2024). African Evaluation Association (2007)
4	African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)	2003/2017	Established under the African Union's *Constitutive Act of 2000* and repositioned in 2017 to support Agenda 2063 monitoring and evaluation, the APRM represents MAE operationalised at the continental governance level. 'APRM marked a paradigm shift from reliance on Western methodologies to peer pressure approaches that are culturally resonant with African governance traditions'.	Kizito, Tshiyoyo and Mazenda (2025).
5	AfrEA 2018–2021 Strategic Plan	2018–2021	MAE was formally entrenched as a strategic pillar, elevating it from an aspirational concept to an operational institutional commitment directing AfrEA's capacity development and advocacy activities.	Tirivanhu (2022).
6	*African Evaluation Journal* – MAE Special Collection	2022	CLEAR-AA commissioned a dedicated MAE Special Collection in the *African Evaluation Journal*, providing a critical scholarly platform for advancing MAE theory and practice and consolidating its academic legitimacy.	Abrahams et al. (2022).

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MAE, Made in Africa Evaluation; AfrEA, African Evaluation Association; APRM, African Peer Review Mechanism; UNDP, United Nations Development Programme; CLEAR-AA, Centre for Learning Evaluation and Results - Anglophone Africa.

funding, evaluation commissioners and theoretical frameworks, with evaluation training curricula also shaped predominantly by Global North orientations. Current evaluation models remain largely Westernised, constituting what Moilwa (2024) describes as 'business as usual' – an approach that structurally 'leaves people behind'.

The power asymmetry at the heart of this problem is structural rather than incidental. African evaluators have been systematically positioned as data collectors for evaluations designed, theorised and interpreted by externally appointed experts, with donor-determined theories, methods and approaches setting the evaluative agenda (Chilisa 2024). Chilisa and Mertens (2021) name this condition 'epistemic violence' – a concept drawn from the postcolonial tradition that captures the harm caused by the systematic invalidation and marginalisation of African ways of knowing through the imposition of external epistemological frameworks. Importantly, epistemic violence is not merely an injury to African pride; it produces structurally distorted evaluations that measure the wrong things, with the wrong tools, for the wrong audiences. As Frehiwot (2022) contends, MAE confronts an uphill battle against epistemic injustice in knowledge production and the unequal power relations embedded in donor-prescribed development ideologies that prioritise quantifiable outputs over qualitative transformation (as cited in Abrahams et al. 2022).

What is distinctively 'African' about MAE, in this critical dimension, is not merely its content but its political consciousness – its refusal to regard the colonial legacy of evaluation as either natural or inevitable, and its commitment to dismantling the institutional and epistemological structures through which that legacy is reproduced (Table 3).

African ontology and epistemology – The relational ways of knowing

The most philosophically distinctive dimension of MAE is its grounding in African ontologies and epistemologies, which depart fundamentally from the individualistic, positivist and secular assumptions that undergird mainstream Western evaluation. Chilisa et al. (2016) identify the African relational paradigm as the epistemological cornerstone of MAE – a paradigm constituted by worldviews in which selfhood, knowledge and value are understood not as individual possessions but as relational achievements, embedded in relationships between people, communities, environments and the living and the nonliving.

This relational ontology is expressed most comprehensively through Ubuntu philosophy, which represents Africa's most widely theorised philosophical contribution to evaluation discourse (Table 4). Ubuntu is not merely a cultural value but a complete epistemological architecture – a philosophy, worldview, natural ethics and way of knowing that centres the basic interconnection of human presence, subordinate to care, collective values, harmony, respect and responsiveness (Bhuda & Marumo 2022). As Abur and Mugumbate (2022) elaborate, Ubuntu articulates the individual always through their relationships with family, community, environment and spirituality – positioning community not as context but as the very site of knowledge production. Crucially, this means that African epistemology begins not with the individual but with the community, such that knowledge itself is regarded as a communal rather than individual possession (Mangena n.d.).

However, a critical evaluation of Ubuntu's role in MAE reveals an important tension that the literature has not always addressed with sufficient rigour: the risk of

TABLE 3: Conceptual genesis of Made in Africa Evaluation and key intellectual contributions.

No.	Dimension	Year	Description and significance	Source of information
1	Chilisa & Malunga foundational paper	2012	Widely regarded as the foundational intellectual text of MAE, this paper introduced the African Evaluation Tree metaphor and established the argument that evaluation in Africa could be radically reconceptualised from within African worldviews.	Chilisa and Malunga (2012).
2	Bellagio Conference	2012	The African Thought Leaders Forum consolidated the emerging MAE discourse, producing recommendations requiring clarity about philosophical and theoretical assumptions informing African evaluation frameworks.	Chilisa (2024).
3	Chilisa (2015) synthesis paper	2015	The single most cited foundational MAE document, commissioned by AfrEA, formalising MAE's conceptual definition and articulating its core values: decolonisation, indigenisation, contextuality, participation, Ubuntu and internationalisation.	Chilisa (2015).
4	Chilisa et al. (2016) – African relational evaluation	2016	Introduced the African relational paradigm as a formal epistemological and methodological framework, defining indigenisation and articulating MAE's ontological, epistemological and axiological foundations.	Chilisa et al. (2016).
5	South-to-South Evaluation Initiative (S2SE)	2018	Extended MAE's conceptual reach beyond Africa into a Global South solidarity framework, internationalising the concept without diluting its African intellectual roots.	Chilisa (2024). UNDP Strategic Innovation (2024).
6	Chilisa and Mertens (2021) – Epistemic violence framework	2021	Framed MAE as a direct response to epistemic violence, providing the most influential contemporary conceptual definition of MAE as resistance to the blind borrowing of Western evaluation standards.	Chilisa and Mertens (2021).
7	Frehiwot (2022) – Pan-African evaluation framework	2022	Proposed a pan-African evaluation framework incorporating cultural practices across borders, shifting MAE from a predominantly South African discourse to a continent-wide conceptual project.	Frehiwot (2022). Abrahams et al. (2022).
8	Asante and Archibald (2023) – Nnoboa and Sankofa	2023	Expanded MAE's philosophical base beyond Ubuntu by introducing Nnoboa and Sankofa as Ghanaian epistemological foundations, diversifying the conceptual repertoire of MAE.	Asante and Archibald (2023).

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MAE, Made in Africa Evaluation; AfrEA, African Evaluation Association; UNDP, United Nations Development Programme.

TABLE 4: Philosophical paradigm – African elements in the Made in Africa Evaluation.

No.	African element in MAE	Definition and description by author(s)	Source of definition
1	Ubuntu philosophy	A philosophy, worldview, natural ethics and way of knowing that originated in Africa – conveying the basic interconnection of human presence, subordinate to care and collective values, harmony, respect and responsiveness. It positions the community, not the individual, as the locus of knowledge. 'Africa's overarching philosophy that shapes its knowledges, values, practices, approaches, methodologies and perspectives is Ubuntu – about seeing the individual through their family, community, environment and spirituality'.	Abur and Mugumbate (2022). Bhuda and Marumo (2022).
2	African relational paradigm	A paradigm based on worldviews dominated by the African definition of self, relations with one another, the environment, and the living and the nonliving. It draws on African philosophies that share relational ways of perceiving reality, ways of knowing (epistemology) and value systems (axiology). 'These philosophies, world views, and paradigms share relational ways of perceiving reality and of being, ways of knowing, and value systems that together make up an African relational paradigm'.	Chilisa et al. (2016).
3	Afrocentric paradigm	A paradigm placing the African view of reality, African ways of knowing, and African value systems on the same level as mainstream scholarly inquiry. Its philosophical foundation – Afrocentricity, developed by Molefi Kete Asante – involves centring African people in their own analytical frameworks. 'The Afrocentric paradigm puts the African view of reality, African ways of knowing and value systems on the same level as mainstream and other scholarly inquiry'.	Fish (2022). Chilisa (2015).
4	Nnoboa and Sankofa – Ghanaian epistemologies	Nnoboa provides an epistemological model for collective, participatory evaluation rooted in communal reciprocity. Sankofa challenges Eurocentric notions of temporal linearity, affirming that the past must be consulted to navigate the future. 'Nnoboa and Sankofa represent an addition to the decolonising and indigenous evaluation knowledge base, building on and going beyond the reliance of MAE on Ubuntu'.	Asante and Archibald (2023).

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MAE, Made in Africa Evaluation.

epistemological essentialism. Ubuntu is a philosophical tradition concentrated most strongly in Southern and East African contexts and does not straightforwardly represent the epistemic traditions of all 2000-plus language communities across the continent (Gqaleni & Foláyan 2026, as cited in Frontiers in Research Metrics and Analytics 2026). When MAE scholarship deploys Ubuntu as the paradigmatic expression of African philosophy, it risks constructing a homogeneous 'African identity' that silences the profound diversity of African thought. This is not a merely academic objection; it has practical consequences for whether MAE can genuinely serve as a continent-wide evaluation framework or whether it reproduces its own form of intellectual hegemony.

Scholars have responded constructively to this tension by broadening MAE's philosophical foundations. Asante and Archibald (2023) introduce Nnoboa – a Ghanaian system of communal collaboration grounded in reciprocal agricultural labour – and Sankofa – the Akan philosophical principle of drawing wisdom from the past to navigate the future – as additional epistemological foundations for MAE that build upon, rather than merely replicate, the Ubuntu tradition. These concepts extend MAE's philosophical reach into West African intellectual traditions and demonstrate that MAE's capacity for epistemological diversity is a strength rather than an inconsistency.

Indigenisation and making evaluation African in substance

The concept of indigenisation represents the practical operationalisation of MAE's philosophical commitments. Chilisa et al. (2016) define indigenisation as the productive blending of an imported discipline with the generation of new concepts and approaches from within a host culture – a process that, in the evaluation context, can be measured along three axes: the degree to which evaluation processes are centred on African people; the degree to which evaluation standards, tools and methodologies originate from African realities and worldviews; and the degree to which African stakeholders regard these ways of knowing as valid and valuable (as cited in Fish 2022). The indigenisation of evaluation is thus not merely a technical matter of adapting instruments; it is a substantive epistemological repositioning that relocates African knowledge at the centre rather than the periphery of evaluative inquiry.

In practice, this repositioning takes several forms. At the methodological level, it involves integrating IKS – which Moilwa (2024) defines as historically, environmentally and culturally grounded knowledge developed by local communities – into evaluation design, data collection and interpretation. At the relational level, it involves reconstituting the evaluator-community relationship on the basis of mutual respect rather than expert authority. As one field evaluator captured it directly: if you come with a power differential, there's no guarantee that you'll get the truth (UNDP Strategic Innovation 2024). This insight is epistemologically significant – it suggests that hierarchical evaluation relationships do not merely affect the ethical quality of the process but the epistemic reliability of its findings.

The Uganda Baraza initiative provides a compelling empirical illustration of indigenisation in practice. Baraza – a Swahili term for a traditional community council or gathering – functioned as a platform through which technical officers and political representatives provided citizens with evaluative information about public service delivery, while citizens in turn monitored the usage of public resources (Moilwa 2024). This is not merely community participation appended to an externally designed evaluation; it is the evaluation reconstituted around an indigenous institutional form, with its own norms of accountability, authority and truth-telling. The MAE use of development indicators that

are contextually aligned to the values and aspirations of Africans – rather than to donor or global development benchmarks – is both a practical and a political expression of this indigenisation imperative (Chilisa 2015, as cited in ASWDNet 2023).

Decolonisation and reclaiming the evaluation agenda

Decolonisation and indigenisation are analytically distinct processes within the MAE framework, although they are deeply interdependent (Table 5). Where indigenisation is primarily concerned with the positive project of embedding African knowledge at the centre of evaluation, decolonisation is primarily concerned with the critical project of dismantling the colonial structures that prevent it. The decolonisation of evaluation is understood as a multifaceted and ongoing process: it refuses the blind adoption of Western evaluation theories and standards; it adapts existing evaluation models to ensure contextual and cultural relevance; and it generates novel evaluation practices, theories and methodologies rooted in African philosophical and cultural traditions (Chilisa et al. 2016; Fish 2022).

This decolonial project is also explicitly political. As Chilisa et al. (2016) assert, genuine decolonisation of evaluation requires the restructuring of power relations within the global architecture of evaluation knowledge generation – not merely the introduction of African methods, but the redistribution of authority over what gets evaluated, when, by whom and with what conceptual frameworks (as cited in Tirivanhu 2022). Dlakavu, Mathebula and Mkhize (2022) complement this structural argument with a strategic and advocacy dimension, calling for the mobilisation of evaluation practitioners, scholars and stakeholders behind Afrocentric evaluation practice – recognising that decolonisation requires not only intellectual innovation but institutional and political contestation (as cited in Abrahams et al. 2022).

The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) represents perhaps the most institutionally significant example of decolonisation in African evaluation governance. Established under Article 5(2) of the *African Union's Constitutive Act of 2000*, and repositioned in 2017 to support monitoring and evaluation of African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, the APRM represents a home-grown accountability mechanism that explicitly rejects the logic of external conditionality in favour of continental peer accountability rooted in African governance traditions (Kizito et al. 2025). Its significance for the MAE argument is substantial: it demonstrates that decolonised evaluation is not merely an academic aspiration but has been operationalised at the highest levels of African political governance.

African evaluation paradigms – A pluralistic landscape

A critical reading of the MAE literature reveals that MAE is not monolithic (Table 6). It does not advocate a single African evaluation paradigm to replace Western ones. Rather, it advocates a pluralistic epistemological landscape in which multiple African paradigms coexist, each contributing distinct dimensions to the MAE project. Fish (2022) identifies five paradigms relevant to MAE practice: the Afrocentric paradigm, the postcolonial indigenous paradigm, the African relational evaluation paradigm, the transformative evaluation paradigm and the culturally competent evaluation paradigm. This pluralism is itself characteristically African – it reflects the continent's philosophical diversity rather than imposing a new orthodoxy.

The Afrocentric paradigm, drawing on Molefi Kete Asante's philosophy of Afrocentricity, positions African people and African perspectives at the analytical centre of inquiry, asserting their right and capacity to generate knowledge on their own terms (Fish 2022). The African relational paradigm, developed most comprehensively by Chilisa et al. (2016), provides the ontological and epistemological scaffolding for relational, community-centred evaluation practice. Together, these paradigms constitute a framework for evaluation that is simultaneously philosophically coherent and contextually flexible.

Perhaps the most theoretically radical element of this pluralistic landscape is the emergent recognition of spiritual ontology as an evaluation epistemology. Chilisa (2024) identifies spiritual reality and relational existence – including what she terms 'abiotic-biotic relations', meaning

TABLE 5: Political and decolonial paradigm – African elements in the Made in Africa Evaluation.

No.	African element in MAE	Definition / description by author(s)	Source of definition
1	Decolonisation of evaluation	A multifaceted process involving the refusal to blindly adopt Western theories, values and standards; the adaptation of evaluation models to African contexts; and the development of novel evaluation practices, theories, and methodologies from local cultures and African philosophies. It entails restructuring power relations in the global architecture of evaluation knowledge generation. 'Decolonisation of evaluation entails restructuring of power relations in the current global architecture of evaluation knowledge generation'.	Chilisa et al. (2016). Fish (2022).
2	Indigenisation	The blending of an imported discipline with the generation of new concepts and approaches from within a culture, measured by the degree to which evaluation processes, standards, tools and methodologies originate from African realities and worldviews. 'Indigenisation: the blending of an imported discipline with the generation of new concepts and approaches from within a culture'.	Chilisa et al. (2016). Dlakavu et al. (2022).
3	APRM as a home-grown evaluation tool	An Afro-centric accountability mechanism mandated by the *AU Constitutive Act of 2000*, repositioned to support AU Agenda 2063 monitoring and evaluation, representing a paradigm shift from externally imposed Western methodologies to culturally resonant peer accountability. 'APRM marked a paradigm shift from reliance on Western methodologies to peer pressure approaches that are culturally resonant'.	Kizito et al. (2025).

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MAE, Made in Africa Evaluation; APRM, African Peer Review Mechanism; AU, African Union.

TABLE 6: Epistemological paradigm – African elements in the Made in Africa Evaluation.

No.	African element in MAE	Definition and description by author(s)	Source of definition
1	African indigenous knowledge systems (IKS)	Systems of knowledge developed by local communities drawing on historical, environmental and cultural insights, providing culturally valid ways of understanding social realities, gathering data and producing evaluative judgements rooted in African lived experience.	Moilwa (2024). Chilisa (2015).
2	Pan-African evaluation framework	A framework incorporating African cultural practices across national and linguistic borders, recognising the interdependent relationship between community-level culture and collective, diverse African culture, and providing a basis for developing a collective ontology and epistemology of evaluation knowledge production.	Frehiwot (2022). Abrahams et al. (2022).
3	Communal and contextual knowledge in MAE	African epistemology begins with community and moves to individuality: knowledge resides in community, not in individuals. Evaluation must therefore be contextually grounded in African values and aspirations, drawing on proverbs, oral traditions and community dialogue as epistemologically legitimate sources.	Asante and Archibald (2023). Chilisa et al. (2016). Chilisa (2015). Mangena (n.d.). Easton (2012).

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MAE, Made in Africa Evaluation.

TABLE 7: Practical and methodological paradigm – African elements in the Made in Africa Evaluation.

No.	African element in MAE	Definition and description by author(s)	Source of definition
1	Empowerment evaluation and epistemic freedom	An approach contributing to positive social change and promoting the epistemic freedom of African evaluators through relational approaches grounded in African institutional frameworks and values – shifting evaluation from a donor accountability tool to a vehicle for community-driven transformation. 'MAE evaluation should mainstream an empowerment evaluation approach that aims at contributing towards positive social change and promoting epistemic freedom of African evaluators'.	Tirivanhu (2022).
2	Spiritual ontology and relational existence	The recognition that African ways of knowing include relationships with ancestral knowledge, sacred ecological systems and metaphysical dimensions of community life – 'abiotic-biotic relations' constituting an evolving fifth research and evaluation paradigm. 'In the Western academy, MAE's recognition of abiotic-biotic relationships and spiritual ontologies is not widely discussed. Evaluators do not understand how to engage realities outside the limited material one they were trained to do'.	Chilisa (2024). Chilisa and Mertens (2021).
3	Contextuality and local ownership	The insistence that evaluation indicators be aligned to the values and aspirations of Africans, led by local actors rather than external donors, with methods localised and processes grounded in mutual respect. 'Using MAE ensures that development indicators are contextual and are aligned to values and aspirations of Africans'.	Moilwa (2024). Chilisa (2015).

Note: Please see the full reference list of this article, Ponge, A., 2026, 'What is 'African' about the Made in Africa Evaluation? An epistemological emancipation endeavour', *African Evaluation Journal* 14(1), a919. https://doi.org/10.4102/aej.v14i1.919 for more information.

MAE, Made in Africa Evaluation.

relationships with ancestral knowledge, sacred ecological systems and metaphysical dimensions of community life – as legitimate and powerful tools for evaluation theorising, model building, and knowledge generation. This represents an evolving fifth research and evaluation paradigm that is perhaps the sharpest departure from the secular, material positivism of Western evaluation frameworks. It challenges not merely the methods of Western evaluation but its foundational assumptions about what is real, what is knowable and what counts as evidence.

Methodological Africanism – Storytelling, proverbs and participatory traditions

Made in Africa Evaluation's African identity is expressed not only in what it thinks but in how it thinks – that is, in the methodological forms through which it conducts evaluative inquiry (Table 7). The literature consistently points to a cluster of characteristically African methodological resources: proverbs, storytelling, oral traditions, communal dialogue, participatory forums and community-based accountability mechanisms. These are not merely culturally acceptable data collection techniques; they are epistemologically legitimate tools of knowledge production that carry the evaluative impulse of African communities.

Easton (2012) demonstrates that West African proverbs encode sophisticated evaluative frameworks – criteria of social value, assessments of moral conduct and judgements of developmental progress – that have functioned as community-based evaluation long before the introduction of Western M&E frameworks (as cited in Asante & Archibald 2023). This insight has profound methodological implications: it means that African communities were never without evaluation; they were without recognition of the evaluation they were already doing. Made in Africa Evaluation's methodological contribution is therefore not to introduce evaluation to African communities but to recognise and systematise the evaluative traditions that have always been present.

In practice, Tirivanhu (2022) argues that MAE evaluation must adopt relational approaches and tools grounded in African institutional frameworks, social systems and values – approaches that depart from the evaluator-as-expert model and instead position evaluation as a collaborative, dialogic and community-embedded process. This includes mainstreaming empowerment evaluation as a vehicle for positive social change and for promoting the epistemic freedom of African evaluators – freedom to theorise, to choose methods and to interpret findings on their own terms (Tirivanhu 2022). Made in Africa Evaluation thereby positions itself within the broader family of cultural and indigenous evaluation approaches that share a commitment to community sovereignty over evaluative processes (UNDP Strategic Innovation 2024).

The recent contributions of Mazigo (2024) and Mazigo et al. (2024) on the Swahili evaluation approach represent a significant methodological advance, grounding evaluation in the wisdom traditions of East African Swahili culture and demonstrating that MAE is increasingly producing region-

specific articulations that extend its methodological reach across different African linguistic and cultural contexts.

Evaluation capacity development and African ownership

A further dimension of MAE's African character concerns the structural question of who conducts evaluation and who benefits from evaluative knowledge. At its most fundamental, MAE insists that genuine African evaluation requires African ownership – not merely African participation in evaluations designed by others, but African agency over the entire evaluative cycle, from the framing of evaluation questions through to the use of findings (Moilwa 2024). This insistence distinguishes MAE from conventional participatory evaluation, which may involve communities in data collection while leaving theoretical, analytical and interpretive authority with external evaluators.

A significant obstacle to this ownership aspiration is the current state of Evaluation Capacity Development (ECD) in Africa. Evaluation Capacity Development in Africa is characterised by donor-centrism – conducted in an unsystematic, project-driven manner oriented towards fulfilling donor accountability requirements rather than building the evaluative capacity of African institutions and communities for their own purposes (Tarsilla 2014, as cited in Tirivanhu 2022). Made in Africa Evaluation's response to this structural challenge is an ECD model grounded in African institutional frameworks, driven by African professional associations such as AfrEA and national Voluntary Organisations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs), and explicitly oriented towards building a generation of evaluators who are simultaneously fluent in global evaluation standards and deeply rooted in African knowledge traditions.

Frehiwot's (2022) pan-African evaluation framework extends this ownership aspiration to a continental scale, recognising that African evaluation sovereignty cannot be achieved within national silos but requires collective institutional infrastructure that reaches across the linguistic, cultural and political borders that colonial administration inscribed (as cited in Abrahams et al. 2022). This Pan-Africanist dimension of MAE – its insistence on continental solidarity as a precondition for epistemological emancipation – aligns it with the broader African political tradition that understands liberation as a collective rather than individual achievement.

Tensions, challenges and unresolved debates

A rigorous analysis of the MAE literature cannot avoid its internal contradictions and unresolved theoretical challenges. Three deserve sustained critical attention, as they go beyond the surface-level acknowledgements common in advocacy-oriented MAE scholarship.

The first and most consequential tension is the risk of epistemological essentialism. By invoking 'African' philosophy, 'African' identity and 'African' ways of knowing as the foundation of a unified evaluation framework, MAE risks constructing a homogeneous African subject that does not exist. Africa's 54 nations, 2000-plus languages and vast diversity of cultural, religious and philosophical traditions cannot be reduced to a single epistemological standpoint, however sympathetically conceived. Chirau, Ramasobana and Ngwabi (2022) note that one of the persistent challenges facing MAE is the over-reliance on a particular conception of African identity that may be more representative of specific regional or cultural traditions than of the continent as a whole. The antidote to this essentialism is not the abandonment of MAE's African-rootedness but rather a more rigorously pluralistic and self-critical approach to the diversity of African philosophies – precisely the approach exemplified by Asante and Archibald's (2023) introduction of Nnoboa and Sankofa alongside, rather than in place of, Ubuntu.

The second tension concerns the boundary between romanticisation and recognition of IKS. Not all indigenous knowledge is beneficial, progressive or compatible with the values of gender justice, human rights and democratic accountability that MAE simultaneously espouses. Some indigenous practices encode patriarchy, gerontocracy or environmental exploitation. A mature MAE framework must develop evaluative criteria for distinguishing between IKS worth centring and those that require critical interrogation – a challenge that the existing MAE literature has not fully addressed (Blaser-Mapitsa 2022).

The third tension is the persistent gap between MAE's conceptual sophistication and its practical operationalisation. A minority voice in the literature argues that MAE remains an underdeveloped body of knowledge, lacking the distinctive tools, instruments and practical guidelines that would enable evaluators to conduct genuinely MAE-grounded evaluations (Chilisa 2024). The majority counterargument – that the problem is not underdevelopment but invisibility, perpetuated by the hostility or indifference of Western-dominated evaluation institutions – does not entirely dissolve this challenge (Chilisa 2024). Tirivanhu (2022) acknowledges that putting MAE principles into practice remains difficult, given the persistence of donor-imposed evaluation frameworks, the scarcity of MAE-oriented training programmes, and the absence of widely accepted MAE-specific tools and instruments. Furthermore, the epistemological tensions between universalist claims of scientific objectivity and MAE's contextual claims represent a genuine philosophical challenge. As one practitioner remarked: 'Science is science, data in one context is data in another, and the objectivity of the scientific method cannot be affected by the subjectivity of contextual realities' (Chilisa 2024). The literature does not fully resolve this debate, and a mature MAE framework must engage it directly rather than dismissing it as a defence of epistemological colonialism.

Made in Africa Evaluation and the global evaluation community – Internationalisation without imperialism

Made in Africa Evaluation does not position itself as an isolationist project. It does not advocate for Africa's withdrawal from global evaluation knowledge but for a

transformed relationship with it – one in which Africa occupies the position of contributor and co-producer rather than perpetual recipient. The values of internationalisation are explicitly built into MAE's conceptual architecture: MAE aspires to be used and learned from beyond Africa, enriching global evaluation theory and practice with distinctively African insights (ASWDNet 2023).

This aspiration is significant because it reframes the standard narrative of knowledge transfer, in which the Global North produces evaluation theory and exports it to the Global South. Made in Africa Evaluation insists on a bidirectional knowledge economy in which African evaluation scholarship is a resource for the global community, not merely a local adaptation of externally validated frameworks. Made in Africa Evaluation is for inclusion, ownership, resilience, equity and development justice – values that resonate with evaluation movements across the Global South (UNDP Strategic Innovation 2024). The knowledge base coming from Africa is a powerful strategy to inform evaluation practice and therefore transform evaluation from an MAE perspective (Chilisa 2024).

The South-to-South Evaluation Initiative (S2SE), spearheaded by AfrEA alongside four other Global South regional evaluation associations, represents the most concrete institutional expression of this globalising ambition – positioning MAE not as a regional concern but as a contribution to a worldwide movement for epistemological justice in evaluation (Chilisa 2024).

Conclusion

This article has advanced an original analytical argument about what is distinctively 'African' about the MAE, going beyond bibliographic synthesis to propose an integrated Epistemological Emancipation Framework that maps five mutually reinforcing dimensions of MAE's African identity.

Made in Africa Evaluation is African institutionally, in its genesis within AfrEA and its connection to Pan-African political thought and continental governance structures, including the APRM. It is African philosophically, in its grounding in Ubuntu, Sankofa, Nnoboa and other IKS that centre relational, communal and spiritually informed ontologies. It is African epistemologically, in its commitment to communal knowledge production, contextual validity and the recognition of spiritual and ancestral knowledge as legitimate sources of evaluative wisdom. It is African methodologically, in its elevation of proverbs, storytelling, participatory forums and community-based accountability mechanisms as epistemologically valid evaluation tools. And it is African politically, in its commitment to decolonising and indigenising evaluation as a form of development justice – a commitment that extends from the level of individual evaluator-community relationships to the continental architecture of evaluation governance.

Critically, this article has also surfaced the internal tensions that a mature MAE framework must address: the risk of epistemological essentialism, the challenge of distinguishing recognition from romanticisation of indigenous knowledge, the persistent gap between conceptual ambition and practical operationalisation, and the unresolved philosophical challenge of reconciling contextual epistemologies with the universalist claims of scientific method.

Looking forward, three directions for the theoretical and institutional development of MAE appear most urgent. Firstly, the development of MAE-specific methodological tools and practical guidelines that would enable evaluators to conduct genuinely Africa-rooted evaluations beyond the current adaptive reliance on Western instruments. Secondly, a more systematic engagement with the internal diversity of African philosophical traditions, moving beyond the Ubuntu-centrism of earlier MAE scholarship towards a genuinely continent-wide epistemological pluralism. Thirdly, the strengthening of MAE's engagement with global debates on decolonising knowledge production, positioning African evaluation scholarship as a contributor to – rather than merely a beneficiary of – the international epistemological justice movement.

Made in Africa Evaluation is, ultimately, an assertion that Africa has the right and the intellectual resources to define, conduct and own evaluation on its own terms. That assertion, this article has argued, is not merely politically necessary. It is epistemologically correct.

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