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The Extract–Learn–Orient methodology for transforming indigenous proverbial wisdom into evaluation philosophy, frameworks and approaches

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Background: The Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE) movement calls for evaluation theories and approaches grounded in African philosophies and indigenous knowledge systems. Although African proverbs contain evaluative wisdom, few methodologies systematically transform this wisdom into evaluation philosophy, frameworks and approaches.

Objectives: This article introduces the Extract–Learn–Orient (ELO) methodology, a culturally grounded process for identifying, interpreting and synthesising evaluative and philosophical insights embedded in indigenous proverbs.

Method: The ELO emerged from reflection on developing the Swahili evaluation approach. Drawing on indigenous research methodologies, qualitative content analysis, philosophical hermeneutics and interpretive evaluation theory, it comprises three phases: (1) Extract, identifying culturally legitimate proverbs; (2) Learn, applying Interpretive Evaluation Mapping to generate evaluative insights; and (3) Orient, synthesising these insights into evaluation philosophy and practical guidance.

Results: Applying ELO to Swahili proverbs generated insights into inquiry, evidence, participation, accountability, experiential knowledge, ethical judgement and contextual sensitivity. These were synthesised into ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological beliefs, together with culturally grounded understandings of evaluation's meaning, rationale and purpose, demonstrating that indigenous proverbs are sources of evaluative reasoning that can inform evaluation theory and practice.

Conclusion: The ELO provides a systematic and transferable methodology for transforming indigenous proverbial wisdom into evaluation knowledge, strengthening the methodological foundations of Made in Africa Evaluation.

Contribution: The ELO offers a replicable pathway through which indigenous communities can develop culturally grounded evaluation philosophies, frameworks and approaches, advancing methodological innovation, epistemic justice and the decolonisation of evaluation.

Keywords: Made in Africa Evaluation; indigenous knowledge systems; African proverbs; evaluation methodology; evaluation philosophy; epistemic justice; culturally responsive evaluation.

Introduction

Over the past three decades, development evaluation has increasingly recognised the limitations of applying universal evaluation models across diverse cultural contexts. This recognition has stimulated growing interest in culturally responsive, participatory and contextually grounded approaches that acknowledge the influence of local values, knowledge systems and social realities on evaluative practice (Mertens 2009; Patton 2015). At the same time, scholars have challenged the dominance of Euro-American epistemologies in evaluation, arguing that they often marginalise alternative ways of knowing and fail to adequately represent the experiences, priorities and value systems of the communities being evaluated (Chilisa 2012; Chilisa & Mertens 2021).

Within Africa, these concerns have given rise to the Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE) movement, which advocates for evaluation theories, methodologies and practices grounded in African histories, philosophies and knowledge systems (African Evaluation Association [AfrEA] 2007; Chilisa et al. 2016). Central to this agenda is the recognition that African societies possess longstanding traditions of inquiry, accountability, judgement and collective learning. Much of

Note: Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article as Online Appendix 1.

this knowledge is preserved and transmitted through oral traditions, including proverbs, stories, songs and communal practices.

Among these forms of knowledge, proverbs occupy a particularly important place. African philosophers and scholars have long argued that proverbs are not merely linguistic ornaments or repositories of folk wisdom; they are condensed expressions of social experience, ethical reasoning and philosophical thought (Gyekye 1997; Mieder 1993; Wiredu 1995). They communicate culturally grounded understandings of responsibility, evidence, judgement, participation and human relationships. In the field of development evaluation, Easton (2012) demonstrated that West African proverbs contain implicit evaluative principles relating to accountability, transparency, performance and decision-making. His work showed that indigenous proverbial traditions can serve as legitimate sources of evaluative reasoning and provide insights relevant to contemporary evaluation theory and practice.

Building on this foundation, Mazigo (2024) developed the Swahili evaluation approach (SEA), a culturally grounded evaluation approach derived from the analysis of Swahili proverbs and engagement with practising evaluators. Swahili evaluation approach demonstrated that indigenous proverbial wisdom can be translated into coherent evaluation principles, philosophical beliefs and practical guidance. However, while SEA and similar initiatives have shown that proverbs can inform evaluation, they leave an important methodological question insufficiently addressed: How can evaluators systematically identify, interpret and translate indigenous proverbial wisdom into evaluation philosophies, principles, frameworks and approaches?

The Extract–Learn–Orient (ELO) methodology emerged through reflection on the process that led to the development of the SEA. In analysing Swahili proverbs, deriving evaluative insights, identifying underlying philosophical beliefs and translating these into a culturally grounded evaluation approach, a recurring methodological logic became apparent. This logic was subsequently articulated as the ELO methodology – a transferable methodology for generating evaluation philosophies, principles, frameworks and approaches from indigenous proverbial knowledge and related wisdom traditions.

The methodology comprises three interconnected phases. The Extract phase focuses on identifying and validating culturally legitimate proverbs with evaluative and philosophical relevance. The Learn phase employs culturally grounded hermeneutic interpretation to uncover the evaluative meanings, assumptions and logics embedded within those proverbs. The Orient phase synthesises these insights into a coherent evaluative philosophy and translates them into guidance for evaluation theory and practice. While the examples used in this article are drawn primarily from the development of the SEA, the methodology is intended to be transferable to other proverbial traditions and indigenous knowledge systems.

By making explicit the methodological process through which indigenous wisdom can be transformed into evaluation philosophy and practice, the ELO Methodology contributes to MAE, epistemic justice and culturally grounded methodological innovation.

Theoretical and conceptual foundations

This section establishes the conceptual basis for the ELO methodology. It brings together four bodies of thought: evaluation as a valuing and meaning-making practice, indigenous knowledge and African philosophical worldviews, proverbs as philosophical and evaluative texts and the need for a systematic methodology for translating proverbial wisdom into evaluation philosophy and practice.

Evaluation as a valuing and meaning-making process

Evaluation is not only a technical exercise of measuring results, but also a process of assigning meaning, significance and value to programmes, policies and interventions. Schwandt and Gates (2021) argue that evaluation is fundamentally concerned with valuing: making reasoned judgements about merit, worth and significance. Similarly, Norris (2015:135) defines evaluation as 'the process of conceiving, obtaining and communicating information for the guidance of decision-making'. Both perspectives emphasise that evaluation is a purposive and interpretive practice. It produces knowledge in order to guide action.

This understanding matters because judgements about value are never culturally neutral. Evaluators must decide what counts as evidence, whose criteria matter, whose experience is credible and which forms of knowledge should guide judgement. These decisions are shaped by ethical, cultural and political contexts. Evaluation therefore requires more than technical competence; it requires attention to meaning, context, power and participation.

Democratic and participatory evaluation traditions have long argued that stakeholders should be involved in deliberating about programme merit and worth (Greene 2005; House & Howe 2000). This opens conceptual space for culturally grounded evaluation approaches that recognise local meanings, lived experience and community-based criteria of value. For this reason, a methodology such as ELO begins from the assumption that evaluation theory and practice can be enriched when local wisdom is treated as a legitimate source of evaluative reasoning.

Indigenous knowledge and African philosophical worldviews

Indigenous knowledge systems have often been marginalised by dominant epistemological traditions, yet they constitute complex and dynamic ways of understanding the world. Such knowledge is built through lived experience, communal

memory, practical engagement, oral transmission and relational responsibility (Berkes 2008; Chilisa 2012). Rather than separating knowledge from ethics and social life, many indigenous knowledge systems understand knowing as embedded in relationships among people, communities, ancestors, land and the wider moral order.

African philosophical traditions similarly emphasise relationality, communal responsibility and the ethical formation of personhood. Concepts associated with Ubuntu and African communitarian thought express the idea that persons become fully human through relationships, responsibility and participation in the life of the community (Gyekye 1997; Mbiti 1969; Wiredu 1995). These traditions are directly relevant to evaluation because evaluation is itself a social practice involving inquiry, judgement, accountability and learning.

The MAE movement builds on this intellectual foundation by calling for evaluation approaches rooted in African values, philosophies and knowledge systems (AfrEA 2007; Chilisa et al. 2016). Made in Africa Evaluation challenges evaluators to move beyond merely adapting external models to African contexts and instead to generate evaluation theories and practices from African epistemologies themselves. However, affirming the value of indigenous knowledge is not enough. The central methodological challenge is how to translate such knowledge into coherent evaluation philosophies, principles and approaches without reducing it to illustration or symbolism. This challenge provides the immediate rationale for ELO.

Proverbs as epistemological and philosophical texts

African proverbs are among the most important carriers of indigenous knowledge. They condense social experience, moral reflection and practical reasoning into memorable forms. Mieder (1993:5) describes proverbs as containing 'wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views' on specific issues. In African philosophical traditions, proverbs have long served as tools for teaching, deliberation, ethical reflection and social judgement (Gyekye 1997; Wiredu 1995).

For evaluation, proverbs matter because they often encode assumptions about evidence, responsibility, causality, participation and judgement. For example, the Swahili proverb *Dalili ya mvua ni mawingu* [The sign of rain is clouds] expresses a logic of inference from observable indicators. *Mlenga jiwe kundini hajui limpataye* [One who throws a stone into a crowd does not know whom it hits] warns against careless judgement and unintended harm. Such proverbs are not merely decorative cultural sayings; they contain evaluative logics that can inform how people inquire, interpret evidence, assess responsibility and judge outcomes.

Easton's (2012) work on West African proverbs demonstrates that African proverbial traditions contain evaluative impulses related to measurement, comparison, inquiry, accountability and stakeholder involvement. Building on this insight, Mazigo (2024) and Mazigo et al. (2024) show that Swahili proverbs can inform the development of culturally grounded evaluation meanings, purposes, philosophical beliefs and practical guidance. These studies established that proverbs can contribute to evaluation theory and practice. What remains less fully articulated is the methodological pathway through which evaluative insights are identified, interpreted and transformed into philosophical and practical evaluation guidance.

Conceptual synthesis: Why Extract–Learn–Orient is needed

The preceding discussion points to a clear methodological need. If evaluation is a valuing and meaning-making practice, then it must attend to the cultural sources from which people derive meanings of value, evidence and responsibility. If indigenous knowledge systems are legitimate sources of theory and practice, then evaluators need rigorous ways of engaging them. If proverbs encode philosophical and evaluative reasoning, then they should not be used only as illustrative quotations; they should be analysed systematically as conceptual resources.

Therefore, proverbs are more than repositories of cultural wisdom. They encode ideas about how knowledge is generated, how reality is understood, what values should guide human action, and how inquiry and judgement ought to be conducted. Its primary contribution is methodological: it provides a replicable process for transforming proverbial wisdom into evaluation philosophy, principles, frameworks and approaches.

The ELO methodology provides a structured process for extracting evaluative and philosophical insights from indigenous proverbs, learning from their meanings through culturally grounded interpretation and orienting evaluation philosophy and practice around the resulting insights. In this sense, ELO does not simply argue that indigenous proverbs are valuable. That has already been demonstrated by earlier work. Its contribution is methodological: it makes explicit a replicable process through which proverbial wisdom can be transformed into evaluation philosophies, principles, frameworks and approaches. While the SEA provides an important example of what can be generated from Swahili proverbial wisdom, ELO explains how such generation can be undertaken systematically and adapted to other proverbial traditions.

The Extract–Learn–Orient methodology

The ELO methodology emerged through methodological reflection on the process that led to the development of the SEA. The development of SEA involved identifying evaluative insights embedded in Swahili proverbs, interpreting their meanings and philosophical implications and translating those insights into a culturally grounded evaluation approach. Through this process, it became apparent that a recurring methodological logic underpinned the movement from indigenous wisdom to evaluation theory and practice.

The ELO methodology was developed to address this gap. Rather than constituting an evaluation approach in its own right, ELO is a methodology for generating evaluation philosophies, principles, frameworks and approaches from indigenous proverbial knowledge and related wisdom traditions. It provides a structured process through which evaluators can identify culturally grounded evaluative insights, interpret their meanings and translate them into evaluation theory and practice.

Although developed from Swahili proverbs, the ELO methodology is transferable to other African and indigenous knowledge traditions. It provides a systematic process for generating culturally grounded evaluation philosophies, frameworks and approaches from indigenous wisdom. In this sense, the SEA represents one application of the methodology, while ELO provides the methodological pathway for developing comparable approaches across diverse cultural contexts.

Figure 1 summarises the overall logic of the ELO methodology. The process begins with indigenous proverbs and proceeds through three interconnected phases. The Extract phase identifies proverbs with evaluative and philosophical significance. The Learn phase interprets and analyses their meanings to uncover embedded evaluative wisdom and philosophical assumptions. The Orient phase synthesises these insights into coherent evaluation philosophies, principles, frameworks and approaches. Together, these phases provide a systematic pathway for transforming indigenous wisdom into evaluation knowledge.

Phase one: Extract – Identifying and curating indigenous evaluative knowledge

The Extract phase establishes the empirical and conceptual foundation of the ELO methodology. Its purpose is to identify, validate and organise indigenous proverbs that contain evaluative and philosophical significance. The central assumption underpinning this phase is that proverbs are not merely cultural artefacts or linguistic expressions; they are repositories of accumulated social experience and condensed forms of indigenous theorising about knowledge, responsibility, learning, evidence, judgement and collective life.

The objective is therefore not to collect proverbs indiscriminately, but to construct a culturally legitimate and analytically useful corpus capable of supporting the generation of evaluation insights and philosophical understandings. This requires a systematic process of identification, validation, selection and categorisation.

Corpus development and selection criteria

The corpus used to illustrate the application of the ELO methodology was derived from the process that informed the development of the SEA. An initial pool of approximately 250 Swahili proverbs was assembled through documentary review, consultation with Swahili language and literature experts, educational materials, digital repositories and community-based sources. The objective was to identify proverbs with the potential to illuminate indigenous understandings of inquiry, learning, evidence, accountability, participation, judgement and social responsibility. To ensure methodological rigour and cultural legitimacy, the initial corpus was subjected to a systematic screening process guided by three interrelated criteria.

Firstly, proverbs were assessed for cultural legitimacy. Priority was given to proverbs that were widely recognised within Swahili-speaking communities and documented in established proverb collections, educational texts and cultural archives. Cultural legitimacy was further strengthened through consultation with Swahili scholars, practising evaluators and community members familiar with the meanings, contexts and contemporary use of the proverbs.

Secondly, proverbs were assessed for evaluative relevance. Proverbs were retained when they contained explicit or implicit insights relating to inquiry, learning, participation, evidence, accountability, judgement, ethics, decision-making, collective responsibility or other concerns central to evaluation theory and practice. The intention was not to identify proverbs about evaluation per se, but rather to identify those that embodied evaluative reasoning capable of informing evaluation philosophy and methodology.

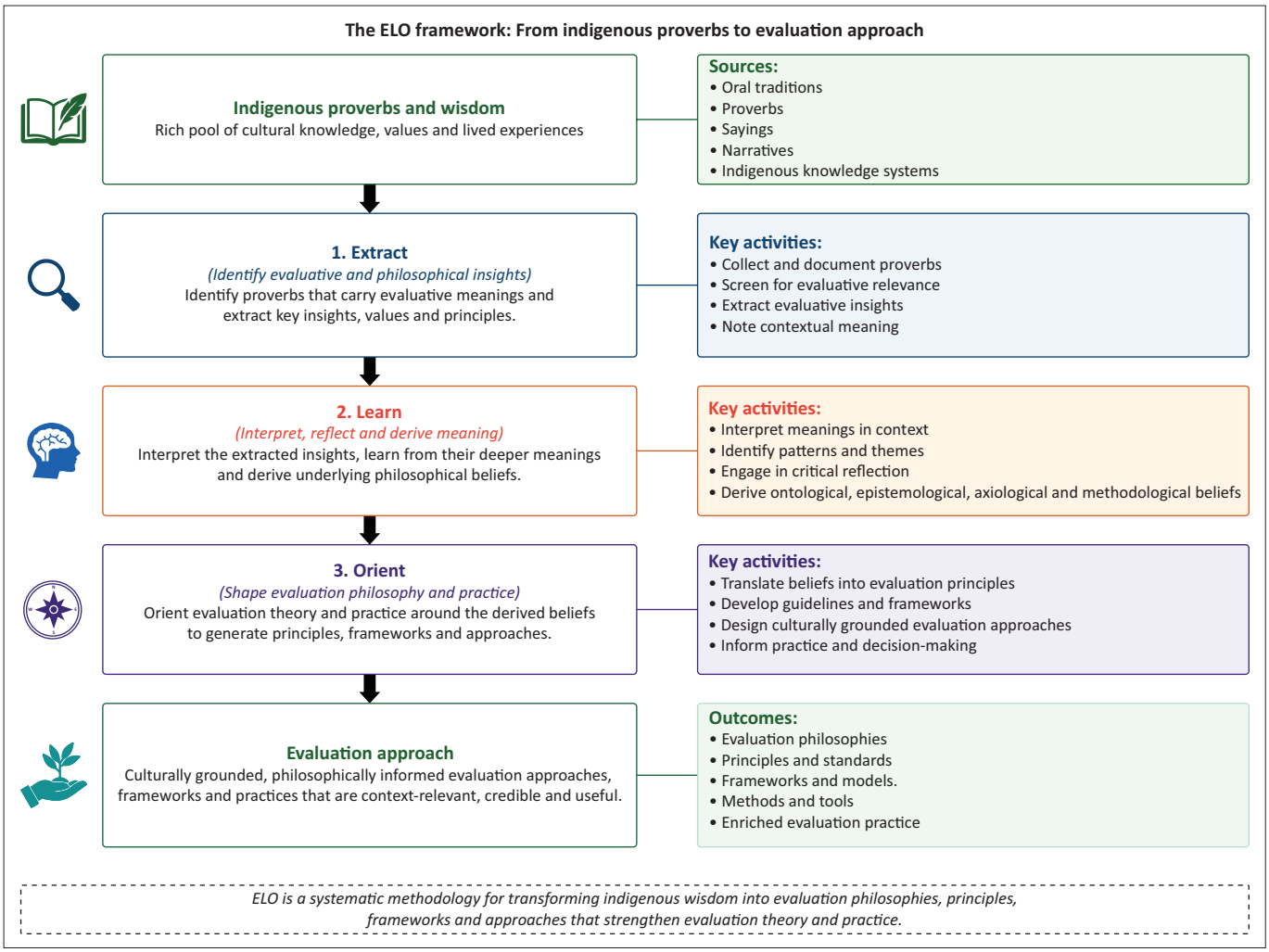
Thirdly, proverbs were assessed for interpretive richness. Preference was given to proverbs whose meanings extended beyond literal instruction and offered opportunities for deeper philosophical reflection and evaluative interpretation. Particular attention was paid to metaphorical depth, conceptual density, contextual flexibility and the capacity of proverbs to generate insights concerning ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology.

The application of these criteria resulted in the selection of 45 proverbs that demonstrated clear evaluative and philosophical significance. These proverbs formed the analytical corpus through which evaluative insights and philosophical beliefs were subsequently derived.

To enhance transparency and provide an audit trail for the Extract phase, Online Appendix 1: Appendix A presents the illustrative corpus of selected proverbs, their thematic classification, English translations and evaluative significance. The Online Appendix 1: Appendix A also demonstrates how the corpus was organised into the three thematic domains that emerged during the extraction process: Participation and Collective Engagement; Knowledge, Learning and Inquiry; and Ethics, Judgement and Responsibility. Together, these proverbs constitute the foundational knowledge base from which the subsequent Learn and Orient phases of the ELO methodology were developed.

Validation and cultural grounding

Because proverbs are context-dependent and often carry multiple layers of meaning, validation was treated as an



ELO, Extract–Learn–Orient.

FIGURE 1: The Extract–Learn–Orient methodology.

essential component of corpus development. Interpretations were discussed with Swahili language experts, indigenous knowledge scholars, practising evaluators and community members familiar with the proverbs' cultural contexts. This process helped confirm linguistic accuracy, contextual appropriateness and cultural legitimacy, while reducing the risk of decontextualised interpretation.

Consistent with indigenous research methodologies (Chilisa 2012), validation was approached as a relational and collective process rather than a purely technical exercise. The objective was not to establish a single authoritative meaning for each proverb but to ensure that interpretations remained grounded within recognised cultural understandings while preserving the plurality of meanings that characterises proverbial discourse.

Thematic categorisation of proverbs

Following corpus development and validation, the selected proverbs underwent an inductive thematic analysis to identify recurring evaluative concerns and philosophical significance. The purpose of this step was not simply to organise the corpus, but to reveal patterns of indigenous reasoning that could inform evaluation theory and practice.

Thematic categorisation drew on principles of qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2014) and involved repeated reading, comparison and clustering of proverbs according to their dominant evaluative orientation. Throughout this process, attention was given to both literal meanings and underlying social, ethical and philosophical messages.

Three broad thematic domains emerged consistently across the corpus. The first domain, Participation and Collective Engagement, encompasses proverbs concerned with cooperation, shared responsibility, collective decision-making and the role of multiple actors in social processes. For example, the proverb *Pekee pekee hauwezi tunga historia* ('One person cannot write history alone') highlights the importance of collective effort and multiple perspectives in understanding social reality. During categorisation, this proverb was interpreted as reflecting indigenous beliefs about collaboration, co-learning and shared knowledge creation, and it therefore was grouped within the participation domain. Similar proverbs emphasising

cooperation and collective action reinforced the centrality of participation as a foundational element of social inquiry and decision-making.

The second domain, Knowledge, Learning and Inquiry, comprises proverbs that address questioning, observation, evidence, interpretation, learning and the development of understanding. A particularly illustrative example is *Kuuliza si ujinga* [Asking is not foolish], which explicitly encourages questioning as a legitimate pathway to knowledge. The proverb reflects an understanding that learning begins with curiosity, dialogue and the willingness to seek clarification. During analysis, it was interpreted as expressing an indigenous philosophy of inquiry in which knowledge is actively pursued through engagement and questioning, rather than passively received. A related proverb, *Dalili ya mvua ni mawingu* [The sign of rain is clouds], further reinforces this theme by emphasising the importance of observable indicators and inferential reasoning in understanding events and anticipating outcomes. Together, these proverbs highlight indigenous perspectives on learning, evidence and the generation of knowledge.

The third domain, Ethics, Judgement and Responsibility, includes proverbs that speak to accountability, fairness, humility, reflexivity, consequences and moral obligations in decision-making. Two proverbs proved particularly illustrative of this domain. *Ahadi ni deni* [A promise is a debt] reflects a strong ethic of accountability and obligation, suggesting that commitments create legitimate expectations that should be fulfilled. Similarly, *Kitanda usichokilalia hujui kunguni wake* [You do not know the bugs of a bed you have not slept on] emphasises humility in judgement and the importance of lived experience before making assessments about others. Together, these proverbs point to ethical responsibilities concerning accountability, credibility and respect for experiential knowledge.

These themes were not predetermined by existing evaluation frameworks but emerged through engagement with the proverbial corpus itself. At the same time, they resonate strongly with key dimensions of evaluation practice, including stakeholder engagement, inquiry, evidence generation, valuing and judgement. The emergence of these domains suggests that indigenous proverbial traditions contain not only cultural wisdom, but also structured ways of thinking about participation, learning, evidence, responsibility and social action.

Linking indigenous themes to evaluation theory and practice

The thematic domains identified during the Extract phase reveal important points of convergence between indigenous proverbial wisdom and foundational concerns within evaluation theory. Although originating from distinct cultural and historical traditions, both indigenous proverbs and contemporary evaluation practice grapple with questions of participation, knowledge generation, evidence, accountability, judgement and collective learning. The thematic analysis therefore did more than organise the proverbial corpus; it established a conceptual bridge between indigenous ways of knowing and evaluation thought. Table 1 summarises the tripartite thematic structure that emerged from the analysis and illustrates how indigenous evaluative concerns correspond to key dimensions of evaluation theory and practice.

The first thematic domain, Participation and Collective Engagement, resonates strongly with participatory and democratic evaluation traditions that emphasise stakeholder inclusion, dialogue and the co-production of knowledge (Greene 2005; House & Howe 2000; Mertens & Wilson 2019). The proverb *Pekee pekee hauwezi tunga historia* suggests that understanding emerges through collective effort and that no single individual possesses a complete account of social reality. Such reasoning aligns closely with evaluation approaches that value stakeholder participation, collective sense-making and shared ownership of evaluative processes.

The second domain, Knowledge, Learning and Inquiry, reflects concerns central to evaluation as a process of systematic inquiry and learning. *Kuuliza si ujinga* positions questioning as a legitimate and necessary pathway to knowledge, while *Dalili ya mvua ni mawingu* highlights the importance of evidence, indicators and inferential reasoning. Together, these proverbs express indigenous understandings of how knowledge is generated, validated and applied. Their underlying logic parallels the concern of evaluation with inquiry, evidence generation, interpretation and organisational learning (Norris 2015; Schwandt & Gates 2021).

The third domain, Ethics, Judgement and Responsibility, reflects concerns that lie at the heart of evaluation as a valuing practice. *Ahadi ni deni* foregrounds accountability by suggesting that commitments create obligations that should be fulfilled and assessed. In contrast, *Kitanda usichokilalia hujui kunguni wake* cautions against superficial judgement and highlights the importance of experiential knowledge when assessing people, programmes and situations. Together,

TABLE 1: Tripartite thematic structure and its evaluation significance.

Thematic domain	Illustrative proverbs	Dominant evaluative concerns	Corresponding evaluation concepts
Participation and Collective Engagement	*Pekee pekee hauwezi tunga historia* [One person cannot write history alone]	Collective action, shared responsibility, dialogue, co-learning and inclusion	Stakeholder engagement, participatory evaluation, democratic evaluation and knowledge co-production
Knowledge, Learning and Inquiry	*Kuuliza si ujinga* [Asking is not foolish]; *Dalili ya mvua ni mawingu* [The sign of rain is clouds]	Questioning, observation, evidence, learning, interpretation and inquiry	Evaluation inquiry, evidence generation, indicators and learning-oriented evaluation
Ethics, Judgement and Responsibility	*Ahadi ni deni* [A promise is a debt]; *Kitanda usichokilalia hujui kunguni wake* [You do not know the bugs of a bed you have not slept on]	Accountability, fairness, humility, reflexivity, experiential knowledge and responsibility	Accountability, valuation, ethical evaluation and stakeholder-centred judgement

these proverbs underscore the ethical dimensions of evaluation, including accountability, fairness, reflexivity, humility and respect for lived experience.

Importantly, the purpose of this analysis is not to force indigenous wisdom into pre-existing evaluation categories. Rather, it is to establish a dialogue between indigenous and contemporary evaluation thought. The thematic domains represent indigenous entry points into questions that evaluation theory has long sought to address, namely how knowledge is generated, how evidence is interpreted, how value is assigned and how judgements are made. In this sense, the Extract phase demonstrates that indigenous proverbs are not merely cultural artefacts; they constitute repositories of evaluative reasoning with direct relevance to evaluation philosophy and practice.

The thematic structure therefore serves as an analytical foundation for the subsequent phases of the ELO methodology. While the Extract phase identifies and organises evaluative concerns embedded within proverbs, it does not yet explain how these concerns generate evaluative insights and philosophical understandings. This task is undertaken in the Learn phase, where the meanings, assumptions and evaluative logics embedded within the proverbs are explored more deeply.

Reflexivity, cultural validation and the outcome of extraction

The Extract phase is not a mechanical process of collecting and classifying proverbs. Rather, it is an interpretive and relational process through which indigenous evaluative knowledge is identified, validated and organised for further analysis. Because proverbs are deeply embedded in language, culture, history and social practice, their meanings cannot be fully understood outside the contexts in which they are produced, transmitted and used. Consequently, the extraction of evaluative insights requires reflexivity, cultural sensitivity and methodological humility.

A central concern during extraction was the avoidance of decontextualisation. Proverbs often carry multiple layers of meaning that extend beyond their literal wording. Their significance is shaped by the circumstances in which they are invoked, the relationships among speakers and audiences and the broader cultural narratives to which they refer. For example, *Ahadi ni deni* [A promise is a debt] conveys more than a simple expectation of fulfilment; it reflects broader notions of trust, reciprocity, moral obligation and social accountability. Likewise, *Kitanda usichokilalia hujui kunguni wake* [You do not know the bugs of a bed you have not slept on] cautions against premature judgement, while simultaneously affirming the value of experiential knowledge. Such meanings emerge only through careful engagement with cultural context.

The Extract phase therefore embraced interpretive plurality. Rather than seeking a single definitive meaning for each proverb, the analysis recognised that proverbs often accommodate multiple yet complementary interpretations. Alternative readings were treated as opportunities for deeper learning and reflection, rather than as inconsistencies requiring resolution. This approach is consistent with hermeneutic traditions that view meaning as emerging through dialogue between text, context and interpreter (Gadamer 2004).

To strengthen cultural validity, interpretations were subjected to consultation and discussion with Swahili language experts, indigenous knowledge holders and practising evaluators. These engagements served several purposes: they helped verify linguistic meanings, clarified contextual usage and ensured that interpretations remained grounded in culturally recognised understandings. Consistent with indigenous research methodologies (Chilisa 2012), validation was approached as a collective and relational process rather than an exercise in external verification alone.

Through this process, the Extract phase produced more than a thematically organised corpus of proverbs. It generated a culturally validated body of indigenous evaluative knowledge organised around three broad domains: Participation and Collective Engagement; Knowledge, Learning and Inquiry; and Ethics, Judgement and Responsibility. These domains provide the analytical foundation upon which subsequent interpretation is built.

The outcome of extraction is therefore a structured and culturally grounded corpus that makes indigenous evaluative reasoning visible and available for further inquiry. Having identified and organised proverbs according to their dominant evaluative concerns, the next phase of ELO focuses on learning from them. The Learn phase moves beyond categorisation to explore the meanings, assumptions, evaluative logics and philosophical beliefs embedded within the proverbial corpus.

Phase two: Learn – Interpreting evaluative and philosophical insights

Having identified, validated and organised proverbs according to their dominant evaluative orientations, the second phase of the ELO methodology focuses on learning from them. It seeks to uncover the evaluative logics, philosophical assumptions and forms of reasoning embedded within that knowledge.

This phase is grounded in the premise that proverbs are more than cultural expressions or repositories of folk wisdom. They are condensed forms of social theory that communicate culturally grounded understandings of knowledge, responsibility, evidence, judgement, learning and human relationships. The task of the Learn phase is therefore interpretive: to engage with proverbs as philosophical and evaluative texts and to derive insights from them that can inform evaluation theory and practice.

Through this process, proverbs are transformed from cultural artefacts into sources of evaluative knowledge. The objective is not merely to understand what a proverb means, but to

explore what it implies for inquiry, learning, valuing, accountability, participation and decision-making.

Interpretive evaluation mapping

To support the Learn phase, the ELO methodology employs interpretive evaluation mapping (IEM), a culturally grounded hermeneutic approach that combines principles of qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2014), philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer 2004) and interpretive evaluation theory (Schwandt & Gates 2021). Interpretive evaluation mapping provides a systematic process for engaging with proverbs as sources of evaluative and philosophical knowledge, enabling evaluators to move beyond surface meanings and uncover the deeper assumptions, values and forms of reasoning embedded within indigenous wisdom traditions.

The process begins by situating each proverb within its linguistic, cultural and social context. Because proverbs derive meaning from the communities that create and use them, understanding their historical, cultural and situational significance is a necessary starting point. Attention is then given to both literal and metaphorical meanings. While some proverbs communicate their lessons directly, others rely on symbolism, analogy and figurative language to convey more complex understandings of social life, responsibility and human relationships.

Building on this contextual and interpretive foundation, the analysis explores the evaluative concerns embedded within each proverb. This involves identifying how the proverb conceptualises learning, evidence, participation, accountability, judgement or other dimensions of evaluative practice. At this stage, proverbs are approached not merely as cultural expressions but as forms of indigenous theorising that offer insights into how people understand and assess the world around them.

The resulting insights are then placed in dialogue with established evaluation concepts and theories. The objective is not to subsume indigenous wisdom within existing evaluation frameworks, but rather to explore areas of convergence, divergence and mutual enrichment. This dialogical process allows indigenous perspectives to challenge, extend and refine conventional understandings of evaluation, while also illuminating points of connection with contemporary evaluation thought.

Finally, the insights generated through interpretation are mapped onto evaluation philosophy, methodology and practice. This involves considering how the evaluative wisdom embedded within proverbs might inform approaches to inquiry, stakeholder engagement, evidence generation, valuing, accountability, learning and decision-making. Through this process, indigenous knowledge is transformed from a cultural resource into a source of evaluative insight capable of informing theory and practice.

Therefore, IEM serves as the analytical engine of the Learn phase. It enables evaluators to engage systematically with indigenous wisdom while preserving cultural meaning and interpretive richness. Rather than fitting proverbs into pre-existing evaluation models, IEM creates a space where indigenous knowledge and evaluation theory can engage in meaningful dialogue, strengthening both in the process.

Illustrative applications of interpretive evaluation mapping

The operation of IEM can be illustrated through two proverbs drawn from different thematic domains identified during the Extract phase. The first example, *Kuuliza si ujinga* [Asking is not foolish], demonstrates how IEM generates insights related to knowledge, learning and inquiry. The second example, *Ahadi ni deni* [A promise is a debt], illustrates how the same process generates insights concerning accountability, responsibility and evaluative judgement. Together, these examples demonstrate the versatility of IEM and its capacity to generate evaluative insights across multiple domains of evaluation theory and practice. Detailed applications of IEM to these and other proverbs are provided in Online Appendix 1: Appendix B

Example 1: ***Kuuliza si ujinga*** **[Asking is not foolish]**

The first stage of IEM involves contextual understanding. Within Swahili communities, the proverb is frequently used to encourage questioning and the pursuit of understanding. It is often invoked when individuals hesitate to seek clarification or fear that asking questions may expose ignorance. The proverb therefore reflects a cultural appreciation of curiosity and recognises inquiry as a legitimate pathway to knowledge.

The second stage focuses on literal and metaphorical interpretation. Literally, the proverb asserts that asking questions should not be regarded as a sign of foolishness. Metaphorically, it communicates a broader understanding that learning requires openness, humility and engagement with others. Knowledge is not simply transmitted from experts to learners but is developed through dialogue and interaction.

The third stage involves evaluative interpretation. From an evaluative perspective, the proverb suggests that meaningful learning occurs when individuals are encouraged to ask questions, challenge assumptions and actively participate in inquiry. Evaluation is therefore understood not merely as a mechanism for measurement, but also as a process of learning and collective sense-making.

The fourth stage entails theoretical dialogue. The evaluative logic embedded within the proverb resonates with learning-oriented and participatory evaluation traditions, which view evaluation as a process of inquiry, reflection and knowledge co-construction (Greene 2005; Patton 2015; Schwandt & Gates 2021). At the same time, the proverb contributes an indigenous perspective by explicitly positioning questioning as a culturally valued practice of learning and knowledge generation.

The fifth stage involves application mapping. The insight generated from the proverb suggests that evaluation designs

should create opportunities for dialogue, encourage stakeholder questioning and support collaborative learning processes. It reinforces the use of participatory methods, open-ended interviewing, reflective practice and adaptive evaluation approaches that evolve through ongoing inquiry.

Collectively, the analysis reveals an indigenous evaluative principle that learning is best achieved through active inquiry, dialogue and shared reflection.

Example 2: ***Ahadi ni deni*** [A promise is a debt]

The first stage of IEM begins with contextual understanding. In Swahili communities, the proverb is widely used to emphasise moral obligation, trustworthiness and social responsibility. It communicates the expectation that commitments made to others create obligations that should be honoured.

The second stage focuses on literal and metaphorical interpretation. Literally, a promise is equated to a debt that must eventually be repaid. Metaphorically, the proverb expresses a broader social ethic of accountability, reciprocity and responsibility. Commitments are not viewed as optional aspirations but as obligations that create legitimate expectations among those affected.

The third stage involves evaluative interpretation. The proverb suggests that actions, commitments and responsibilities should be assessed against what was promised. It therefore introduces a culturally grounded logic of accountability in which value is partly determined by the extent to which obligations have been fulfilled.

The fourth stage entails theoretical dialogue. This evaluative reasoning aligns with accountability-oriented evaluation approaches and results-based management frameworks that assess whether the intended objectives, commitments and outcomes have been achieved. However, the proverb extends these approaches by locating accountability within a moral and relational framework, rather than solely within managerial or contractual arrangements.

The fifth stage involves application mapping. The insight generated from the proverb supports evaluation approaches that assess the fulfilment of commitments, compare promised and actual results and incorporate stakeholder perspectives in determining whether obligations have been met. It also reinforces the importance of accountability mechanisms that are meaningful to local communities rather than exclusively to external funders or programme managers.

The analysis therefore reveals an indigenous evaluative principle that accountability is fundamentally relational and should be assessed through the fulfilment of commitments made to others. Detailed applications of IEM to these and other proverbs are presented in Online Appendix 1: Appendix B, which serves as an analytical audit trail for the Learn phase of the ELO methodology.

Emerging evaluative insights

Applying IEM to the proverbial corpus generated a set of recurring evaluative insights that cut across individual proverbs and thematic domains. These insights constitute the primary analytical outputs of the Learn phase. While initially derived from specific proverbs, they transcend individual expressions and reveal broader indigenous understandings of how inquiry is conducted, how evidence is interpreted, how value is assigned and how responsibility is exercised within social life.

The process of interpretation revealed that many proverbs converge around common evaluative concerns, despite differences in wording, imagery and context. Through iterative analysis, these concerns were synthesised into broader evaluative concepts capable of informing evaluation theory and practice. Table 2 summarises the principal evaluative insights that emerged from the proverbial corpus.

Taken together, these insights reveal a coherent indigenous evaluative logic. Learning is understood as a dialogical process grounded in inquiry and participation; evidence is interpreted through culturally meaningful indicators and contextual observation; accountability is linked to the fulfilment of social obligations and commitments; and credible judgement is informed by lived experience, ethical responsibility and contextual understanding. Rather than constituting isolated observations, these insights collectively articulate indigenous perspectives on how knowledge should be generated, how value should be determined and how social action should be assessed.

Importantly, the significance of these insights extends beyond their practical relevance for evaluation design and implementation. They also point towards deeper assumptions about reality, knowledge, values and human relationships. In this sense, the evaluative insights generated through the Learn phase serve as a conceptual bridge between interpretation and philosophy. While the Learn phase focuses on understanding the evaluative wisdom embedded in proverbs, the Orient phase seeks to identify and articulate the broader philosophical beliefs that underpin that wisdom.

Reflexive and ethical interpretation

Interpretation within the Learn phase was guided by an ethic of humility, cultural respect and reflexive engagement. Because proverbs are inherently polysemous, their meanings are shaped by context, audience, historical experience and social purpose. Consequently, IEM was not employed to reduce proverbs to fixed evaluation concepts or predetermined theoretical categories. Rather, it was used as a dialogical process through which indigenous meanings could be explored, interpreted and placed in conversation with evaluation theory while preserving their cultural integrity.

Throughout the interpretive process, indigenous understandings were privileged, while remaining open to

TABLE 2: Emerging indigenous evaluative insights.

Evaluative insight	Illustrative proverbs	Implications for evaluation practice
Inquiry and learning	*Kuuliza si ujinga; Asiyeuliza hanalo ajifunzalo*	Learning-oriented and participatory evaluation
Evidence and indicators	*Dalili ya mvua ni mawingu; Panapofuka moshi pana moto*	Context-sensitive indicators and evidence generation
Collective knowledge creation	*Pekee pekee hauwezi tunga historia; Vichwa viwili ni bora kuliko kimoja*	Stakeholder engagement and collaborative sense-making
Accountability	*Ahadi ni deni*	Assessment of commitments, obligations and performance
Experiential knowledge	*Kitanda usichokilalia hujui kunguni wake*	Valuing insider perspectives and lived experience
Ethical judgement	*Mlenga jiwe kundini hajui limpataye*	Reflexive and do-no-harm evaluation practice
Contextual sensitivity	*Jogoo wa shamba hawiki mjini*	Adaptive and culturally responsive evaluation

dialogue with contemporary evaluation scholarship. Alternative interpretations were retained where appropriate, recognising that proverbial wisdom often accommodates multiple layers of meaning and may illuminate different aspects of evaluative practice depending on context. This interpretive plurality was treated as a source of analytical richness rather than a methodological weakness.

Consistent with indigenous research methodologies (Chilisa 2012), consultation with Swahili language experts, indigenous knowledge holders and practising evaluators strengthened the cultural legitimacy and contextual sensitivity of the analysis. These engagements provided opportunities to verify interpretations, challenge assumptions and ensure that the emerging evaluative insights remained grounded in culturally recognised understandings rather than external analytical impositions.

The outcome of the Learn phase is thus a body of evaluative knowledge that is both culturally grounded and analytically robust. Having identified and interpreted the evaluative wisdom embedded within the proverbial corpus, the next phase of ELO focuses on orientation. The Orient phase synthesises these insights into explicit ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological beliefs capable of informing culturally grounded evaluation philosophies, frameworks and approaches.

Phase three: Orient – Transforming evaluative insights into evaluation philosophy

The Orient phase constitutes the culminating stage of the ELO methodology. While the Extract phase identifies and organises indigenous evaluative knowledge, and the Learn phase interprets that knowledge to generate evaluative insights, the Orient phase synthesises those insights into a coherent philosophical framework capable of guiding evaluation theory and practice.

The central premise of this phase is that recurring evaluative insights are not merely practical observations; they also reveal deeper assumptions about reality, knowledge, values, human relationships and social action. When synthesised systematically, these assumptions constitute an evaluation philosophy. Drawing on Mertens and Wilson's (2019) evaluative philosophy schema, the Orient phase translates indigenous evaluative insights into four interrelated philosophical dimensions: ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology. In addition, the analysis revealed culturally grounded understandings of the meaning, rationale and purpose of evaluation that further enrich the philosophical framework.

This process represents a movement from evaluative wisdom to evaluative philosophy. For example, insights concerning inquiry, dialogue and learning point towards assumptions about how knowledge is generated and validated. Insights concerning accountability and responsibility reveal underlying beliefs about values and ethical obligations. Similarly, insights concerning experiential knowledge and contextual sensitivity suggest assumptions about the nature of reality and how it can be understood. Through synthesis, individual evaluative insights are transformed into broader philosophical commitments capable of informing evaluation design, implementation and use.

Table 3 illustrates how the principal evaluative insights generated during the Learn phase were synthesised into philosophical beliefs. Detailed illustrative examples of this transformation process are provided in Online Appendix 1: Appendix C. The sections that follow elaborate on these philosophical dimensions and demonstrate how evaluative insights derived from Swahili proverbs were synthesised into a culturally grounded evaluation philosophy.

Ontological beliefs: The nature of the evaluand

The ontological beliefs emerging from the Learn phase are rooted primarily in insights concerning experiential knowledge and contextual sensitivity. Proverbs such as *Kitanda usichokilalia hujui kunguni wake* [You do not know the bugs of a bed you have not slept on], *Matundu ya nyumba ayajua mwenye nyumba* [Only the house owner knows the holes in the house] and *Maji usiyoyafika hujui kina chake* [You do not know the depth of water you have not reached] suggest that social realities exist independently of observers but are only partially knowable through lived experience and situated engagement.

These proverbs point towards a relational ontology in which the evaluand is understood as dynamic, contextually situated and experienced differently by different actors. Reality is therefore neither entirely objective nor wholly subjective; rather, it is revealed through relationships, participation and proximity. Therefore, understanding a programme, intervention or social phenomenon requires engagement with those who experience it directly.

From this perspective, evaluation cannot rely solely on detached observation or externally defined representations of reality. Instead, it must recognise that different stakeholders encounter and interpret the evaluand from distinct positions

TABLE 3: From evaluative insights to evaluation philosophy.

Evaluative insights (learn phase)	Philosophical dimension	Emerging belief
Inquiry, learning, dialogue and evidence	Epistemology	Knowledge is generated through questioning, experience, observation and collective learning.
Experiential knowledge and contextual sensitivity	Ontology	Reality is relational, contextual and best understood through lived experience.
Accountability, ethical judgement and responsibility	Axiology	Evaluation should be guided by relational ethics, accountability and social responsibility.
Participation, collective knowledge creation and contextual adaptation	Methodology	Evaluation should be participatory, culturally grounded, adaptive and responsive.
Accountability, hidden problems and collective learning	Purpose, rationale and meaning	Evaluation exists to promote accountability, reveal hidden realities, support learning and strengthen collective understanding.

and experiences. The task of evaluation is therefore to engage with these multiple realities and construct a richer understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Ontologically, the ELO methodology therefore views the evaluand as a relational and context-dependent reality whose meaning emerges through interaction with those who live and experience it.

Epistemological beliefs: Ways of knowing

The epistemological beliefs emerging from the Learn phase are grounded in evaluative insights concerning inquiry, learning, evidence, observation and dialogue. Proverbs such as *Kuuliza si ujinga* [Asking is not foolish], *Asiyeuliza hanalo ajifunzalo* [He who does not ask learns nothing], *Dalili ya mvua ni mawingu* [The sign of rain is clouds] and *Panapofuka moshi pana moto* [Where there is smoke, there is fire] collectively suggest that knowledge is generated through questioning, experience, observation and interpretation.

These insights point towards an experiential, dialogical and inferential epistemology. Knowledge is not viewed as something that resides exclusively in experts, institutions or formal systems. Rather, it emerges through interaction, reflection, observation and engagement with lived realities. Learning occurs through asking questions, listening to others, observing signs of change and interpreting evidence within its cultural and social context.

The emphasis on observable signs and contextual interpretation also suggests that knowledge is often indirect and inferential. Just as clouds may signal rain and smoke may signal fire, evaluators must learn to recognise culturally meaningful indicators that point to underlying processes, outcomes and experiences. At the same time, proverbs such as *Adhabu ya kaburi aijua maiti* [The pain of the grave is known only to the corpse] affirm the value of insider knowledge and lived experience as important sources of understanding.

From an evaluation perspective, this epistemological orientation encourages evaluators to value multiple forms of evidence, including stories, observations, local indicators and experiential knowledge. It supports participatory inquiry, dialogue-based learning and the recognition that credible knowledge often emerges through interaction between evaluators and stakeholders, rather than through detached observation alone.

Epistemologically, the ELO methodology therefore views knowledge as socially constructed, contextually situated and generated through inquiry, experience, dialogue and interpretation.

Axiological beliefs: Values and ethics in evaluation

The axiological beliefs emerging from the Learn phase are rooted in evaluative insights concerning accountability, ethical judgement, responsibility, humility and relational obligation. Proverbs such as *Ahadi ni deni* [A promise is a debt], *Mlenga jiwe kundini hajui limpataye* [He who throws a stone into a crowd does not know whom it hits] and *Nyani haoni kundule* [The baboon does not see its own rear] reveal a moral orientation centred on responsibility to others and awareness of the consequences of one's actions.

These insights suggest a relational axiology in which values are embedded within social relationships, rather than in abstract principles alone. Accountability is understood not merely as compliance with externally imposed standards, but also as a moral obligation arising from commitments made to others. Likewise, ethical judgement requires humility, reflexivity and attentiveness to the effects of one's decisions and actions.

The evaluative insights generated during the Learn phase also indicate that fairness and responsibility are inseparable from context. Judgements must consider whose interests are affected, whose voices are heard and who bears the consequences of decisions. Ethical evaluation therefore involves more than technical rigour; it requires respect, reciprocity, transparency and care for those who participate in and are affected by evaluation processes.

From this perspective, evaluation should be guided by principles of accountability, reflexivity, inclusion and social responsibility. Evaluators are expected to recognise their own limitations, remain attentive to unintended consequences and ensure that evaluation processes contribute positively to the communities they serve.

Axiologically, the ELO methodology views evaluation as a morally grounded practice guided by relational ethics, shared responsibility and accountability to affected stakeholders.

Methodological beliefs: Approaches to inquiry and judgement

The methodological beliefs emerging from the Learn phase are grounded in evaluative insights concerning participation, collective knowledge creation, contextual adaptation, evidence generation and practical action. Proverbs such as *Pekee pekee hauwezi tunga historia* [One person cannot write

history alone], *Jogoo wa shamba hawiki mjini* [A country rooster does not crow in town] and *Aingiaye baharini huogelea* [He who enters the sea must swim] collectively suggest that effective inquiry requires participation, contextual sensitivity and adaptive practice.

These insights point towards a participatory and context-responsive methodology. Knowledge is viewed as collectively generated rather than individually owned, implying that evaluation should involve diverse stakeholders in framing questions, generating evidence, interpreting findings and making judgements. The process of evaluation is therefore understood as collaborative rather than extractive.

The emphasis on contextual adaptation reflects a recognition that methods cannot simply be transferred from one setting to another without considering local realities. The proverb *Jogoo wa shamba hawiki mjini* cautions against the uncritical application of ideas, methods or assumptions across contexts. Instead, evaluators are encouraged to adapt their approaches to local cultures, experiences and forms of knowledge.

The methodological insights also emphasise responsiveness and practical competence. Evaluation is not merely an academic exercise; it is an engaged process that requires preparation, learning, responsiveness to emerging information and the ability to navigate complexity.

Methodologically, the ELO methodology therefore advocates participatory, culturally grounded, adaptive and context-sensitive approaches to evaluation that integrate local knowledge systems and encourage collective learning.

Meaning, rationale and purpose of evaluation

Beyond the four philosophical dimensions, the Orient phase revealed culturally grounded understandings of the meaning, rationale and purpose of evaluation itself. These dimensions emerged from recurring evaluative insights concerning accountability, learning, problem identification and collective understanding.

The proverb *Ahadi ni deni* [A promise is a debt] suggests that evaluation exists, in part, to assess whether commitments have been honoured. Evaluation is therefore understood as a mechanism for accountability and trust-building within social relationships. In contrast, proverbs such as *Hila ya kikwapa kunuka pasipo kidonda* [The armpit smells despite no wound] and *Mficha maradhi kifo kinamuumbua* [He who hides illness is exposed by death] highlight the rationale for evaluation as a means of uncovering hidden problems, identifying risks and supporting corrective action before challenges become crises.

The proverb *Pekee pekee hauwezi tunga historia* [One person cannot write history alone] provides insight into the meaning of evaluation as a collective process of learning and sense-making. Evaluation is not simply the measurement of performance; it is a social process through which communities, organisations and stakeholders jointly reflect on experience, construct understanding and make decisions about future action.

Together, these insights suggest that evaluation serves three interrelated functions. It promotes accountability by assessing whether commitments have been fulfilled; it supports learning and improvement by identifying hidden challenges and opportunities; and it facilitates collective understanding by bringing diverse perspectives together to interpret experience and inform action.

These culturally grounded understandings extend conventional views of evaluation beyond technical measurement and performance assessment. They position evaluation as a relational, ethical and socially necessary practice that contributes to accountability, learning, adaptation and collective well-being.

Synthesising a proverb-informed evaluation philosophy

The Orient phase demonstrates how culturally grounded evaluative insights can be transformed into a coherent evaluation philosophy. Beginning with the evaluative wisdom embedded in Swahili proverbs, the ELO methodology systematically synthesises insights concerning inquiry, evidence, participation, accountability, judgement and lived experience into broader philosophical dimensions and evaluative concepts (Table 4). In doing so, it reveals that indigenous proverbial traditions are not merely repositories of cultural wisdom, but also sources of philosophical reasoning capable of informing evaluation theory and practice.

The resulting philosophy presents evaluation as a relational and contextually grounded process through which communities generate knowledge, assess commitments, learn from experience and make collective judgements about social action. Reality is understood as dynamic and experienced through relationships; knowledge emerges through dialogue, observation and lived experience; ethics are rooted in accountability and responsibility; and methodological choices are guided by participation, contextual sensitivity and adaptability. Evaluation is therefore conceived not simply as a technical exercise of measurement but as a culturally embedded practice of inquiry, learning, valuing and collective sense-making.

Although this philosophical framework is illustrated through Swahili proverbs, the methodological process through which it was generated is transferable to other African and indigenous knowledge traditions. By making explicit the progression from indigenous wisdom to evaluative insights and from evaluative insights to evaluation philosophy, the ELO methodology provides a systematic process for developing culturally grounded evaluation philosophies, frameworks and approaches. The SEA represents one application of this methodology.

The Orient phase therefore completes the transformation of indigenous proverbial wisdom into evaluation knowledge. Together, the Extract, Learn and Orient phases demonstrate how culturally embedded knowledge systems can serve not only as sources of contextual relevance, but also as generative foundations for evaluation philosophy, methodological innovation and epistemic pluralism in evaluation.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that indigenous proverbs are not only repositories of cultural wisdom, but also sources of evaluative reasoning and philosophical reflection. The principal contribution of this study, however, lies in articulating the ELO methodology as a systematic process for transforming that wisdom into evaluation philosophy, frameworks and approaches. In doing so, the study extends previous scholarship by making explicit the methodological pathway through which indigenous knowledge can inform evaluation theory and practice.

By applying ELO to Swahili proverbs, the study demonstrates that indigenous knowledge systems contain assumptions about reality, knowledge, values, accountability, participation and social action that are directly relevant to evaluation. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates concerning MAE, indigenous methodologies, epistemic justice and the decolonisation of evaluation.

Extract–Learn–Orient as a methodological contribution to Made in Africa Evaluation

The emergence of the MAE movement reflected growing dissatisfaction with the dominance of Euro-American theories, methodologies and value systems within evaluation practice. Scholars associated with MAE have consistently argued that evaluation in Africa should be grounded in African histories, cultures, philosophies and knowledge systems, rather than relying exclusively on externally developed frameworks (AfrEA 2007; Chilisa et al. 2016; Mbava & Chapman 2020). This scholarship has played a critical role in exposing the limitations of universalist assumptions embedded within mainstream evaluation and in affirming the legitimacy of African ways of knowing.

Despite these advances, a methodological challenge has remained largely unresolved. While MAE scholarship has demonstrated why indigenous knowledge matters, less attention has been given to how indigenous knowledge can be systematically translated into evaluation philosophy and practice. Much of the literature has focused on critique, adaptation and contextualisation, leaving open the question of how culturally grounded evaluation frameworks can be generated from within indigenous knowledge systems themselves.

The ELO methodology responds to this challenge. By providing a structured process through which indigenous wisdom can be identified, interpreted and synthesised into evaluation philosophy, the ELO moves the conversation beyond critique towards construction. Rather than adapting existing evaluation approaches to African contexts, ELO begins with indigenous knowledge itself and works outward towards evaluation theory and practice. In this respect, this article contributes to the MAE agenda by offering a methodological framework for systematically generating African evaluation philosophies.

The significance of this contribution extends beyond the Swahili context. It demonstrates that indigenous knowledge systems can generate philosophical and methodological foundations for evaluation, thereby advancing the broader aspirations of MAE to develop evaluation approaches grounded in African intellectual traditions.

From indigenous wisdom to evaluation theory

A second contribution of the study lies in demonstrating that indigenous proverbial traditions can function as sites of theoretical production. Historically, evaluation theory has

TABLE 4: Proverb-informed evaluation philosophy emerging from the Extract–Learn–Orient methodology.

Philosophical dimension	Illustrative proverbs	Emerging belief	Evaluation principle
Ontology	*Kitanda usichokilalia hujui kunguni wake; Matundu ya nyumba ayajua mwenye nyumba; Maji usiyoyafika hujui kina chake*	Reality is relational, contextual and experienced differently by different actors. The evaluand is dynamic and best understood through lived experience and situated engagement.	Evaluation should engage multiple perspectives and privilege experiential understanding of the evaluand.
Epistemology	*Kuuliza si ujinga; Asiyeuliza hanalo ajifunzalo; Dalili ya mvua ni mawingu; Panapofuka moshi pana moto*	Knowledge is generated through inquiry, dialogue, observation, experience and interpretation. Evidence emerges from both direct experience and culturally meaningful signs of change.	Evaluation should value multiple forms of evidence, including local knowledge, observation, dialogue, storytelling and participatory inquiry.
Axiology	*Ahadi ni deni; Mlenga jiwe kundini hajui limpataye; Nyani haoni kundule*	Evaluation is a moral practice guided by accountability, humility, reflexivity and responsibility towards others.	Evaluation should uphold relational ethics, transparency, inclusion, accountability and respect for affected stakeholders.
Methodology	*Pekee pekee hauwezi tunga historia; Jogoo wa shamba hawiki mjini; Aingiaye baharini huogele*	Inquiry should be participatory, adaptive, culturally grounded and responsive to context. Knowledge is co-created rather than extracted.	Evaluation should employ participatory, context-sensitive and flexible approaches that integrate local knowledge systems.
Purpose of evaluation	*Ahadi ni deni*	Evaluation exists to assess whether commitments and obligations have been fulfilled.	Evaluation should promote accountability by examining the extent to which promised results and responsibilities have been achieved.
Rationale for evaluation	*Hila ya kikwapa kunuka pasipo kidonda; Mficha maradhi kifo kinamuumbua*	Problems are not always immediately visible; evaluation helps reveal hidden challenges and emerging risks.	Evaluation should support learning, early problem detection, corrective action and continuous improvement.
Meaning of evaluation	*Pekee pekee hauwezi tunga historia; Kitanda usichokilalia hujui kunguni wake*	Evaluation is a collective process of learning, sense-making and understanding lived realities.	Evaluation should facilitate collaborative reflection, shared learning and the co-construction of knowledge.

largely emerged from formal academic traditions rooted in social science, public administration and policy studies. Such traditions have often privileged written texts, institutional expertise and formalised conceptual frameworks as the primary sources of theory.

The findings challenge this assumption. The analysis reveals that Swahili proverbs contain implicit theories concerning causality, evidence, learning, accountability, participation and judgement. Proverbs such as *Dalili ya mvua ni mawingu* [The sign of rain is clouds] express a logic of inference based on observable indicators, while *Kuuliza si ujinga* [Asking is not foolish] articulates an understanding of knowledge generation through inquiry and dialogue. Similarly, *Ahadi ni deni* [A promise is a debt] embodies a theory of accountability grounded in social obligation and relational responsibility.

These findings resonate with Appiah's (1992) and Wiredu's (1996) arguments that African intellectual traditions embody coherent systems of reasoning and philosophical reflection. They also align with Dei's (ed. 2011) contention that indigenous knowledge systems are not simply cultural artefacts but dynamic intellectual traditions capable of generating theory and guiding practice. From this perspective, proverbs perform epistemological work. They do not merely transmit values; they organise experience, explain relationships and guide judgement.

The study therefore extends Easton's (2012) pioneering work on African proverbs and evaluation. While Easton demonstrated that proverbs contain evaluative wisdom, the ELO methodology makes explicit the analytical process through which that wisdom can be translated into evaluation philosophy and methodological guidance. In doing so, it contributes to broader efforts to expand the sources from which evaluation theory is generated and to recognise indigenous communities as producers of evaluative knowledge, rather than merely subjects of evaluation.

Generating evaluation philosophy from indigenous knowledge

One of the most significant findings of the study is that indigenous evaluative insights can be synthesised into a coherent evaluation philosophy. Through the Orient phase, evaluative insights generated during the Learn phase were transformed into ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological beliefs. This process demonstrates that indigenous knowledge systems are capable not only of informing evaluation practice, but also of contributing to foundational questions concerning reality, knowledge, values and inquiry.

This finding is particularly significant in the light of contemporary evaluation theory. Scholars such as Mertens and Wilson (2019) and Schwandt and Gates (2021) have emphasised that evaluation is underpinned by philosophical assumptions regarding what constitutes reality, how knowledge is generated, what values matter, and how inquiry should be conducted. Yet these philosophical foundations have often been derived from Western intellectual traditions. The present study demonstrates that comparable philosophical foundations can emerge from indigenous sources.

The resulting philosophy differs in important respects from conventional evaluation paradigms. Reality is understood as relational and contextually situated, rather than as a fixed object of measurement. Knowledge emerges through inquiry, dialogue, observation and lived experience, rather than through detached observation alone. Values are grounded in accountability, reciprocity and social responsibility, while methodology is characterised by participation, contextual sensitivity and collective learning.

These findings demonstrate that indigenous knowledge systems can generate coherent evaluation philosophies through systematic methodological inquiry, thereby extending the philosophical foundations available to evaluation theory.

Extract–Learn–Orient and the decolonisation of evaluation

The findings also contribute to ongoing debates concerning the decolonisation of evaluation. Decolonisation is often framed as a process of increasing cultural responsiveness, participation or representation within existing evaluation systems. While these objectives are important, scholars such as Chilisa (2012), Santos (2018) and Smith (2021) argue that meaningful decolonisation requires transforming the epistemological foundations through which knowledge is produced, validated and utilised.

From this perspective, the central challenge is not simply whether indigenous perspectives are included in evaluation, but whether indigenous communities are recognised as legitimate producers of evaluative knowledge and theory. Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice is particularly relevant here. Indigenous communities have frequently been positioned as sources of data, while their knowledge systems have been denied equal epistemic status within formal evaluation discourse.

The ELO methodology responds to this challenge by creating a structured pathway through which indigenous wisdom can generate evaluation philosophy and methodological guidance. Rather than treating proverbs as supplementary cultural references, the framework recognises them as sources of evaluative reasoning capable of shaping how evaluation is conceptualised and practised. In this sense, ELO contributes to epistemic justice by repositioning indigenous communities as contributors to evaluation theory, rather than merely as participants in evaluation processes.

Transferability and the possibility of pluriversal evaluation

Although the ELO was developed through engagement with Swahili proverbs, its methodological logic is not confined to the Swahili context. The significance of ELO lies less in the specific content of Swahili wisdom and more in the process through which indigenous wisdom is transformed into evaluation knowledge. The ELO sequence provides a methodological structure that can potentially be applied to other African and indigenous knowledge traditions.

This transferability aligns with broader discussions concerning epistemological pluralism and what Escobar (2020) describes as the pluriverse – a world in which multiple knowledge systems coexist and contribute to a collective understanding without being subsumed within a single universal framework. Rather than seeking one universally applicable evaluation philosophy, ELO creates opportunities for multiple culturally grounded philosophies to emerge from diverse knowledge traditions.

The framework could therefore be applied to other African proverbial traditions, including Akan, Yoruba, Shona, Xhosa, Wolof, Maasai and many others. It may also have relevance beyond Africa wherever communities maintain rich oral traditions that shape understandings of value, accountability, learning and social change. The result is not a single indigenous evaluation philosophy, but a family of locally grounded philosophies linked by a shared methodological process.

In this respect, ELO contributes to a more pluralistic and equitable evaluation field – one in which different traditions are recognised not merely as sources of contextual variation, but also as sources of philosophical and methodological innovation.

Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the framework was developed and illustrated through engagement with Swahili proverbs, and therefore requires application and testing in other cultural and linguistic contexts. Comparative studies across different indigenous traditions would provide opportunities to assess both the robustness and adaptability of the methodology.

Secondly, the interpretation of proverbs remains an inherently hermeneutic and context-dependent process. Although cultural validation procedures were employed throughout the study, alternative interpretations remain possible. Future applications of ELO should therefore continue to prioritise reflexivity, cultural accountability and engagement with indigenous knowledge holders.

Thirdly, while the ELO methodology demonstrates how evaluation philosophy can be generated from indigenous wisdom, further work is required to explore how such philosophies influence evaluation design, implementation, use and outcomes in practice. Future research could examine the application of proverb-informed evaluation approaches in real-world evaluation settings and assess their implications for learning, accountability, utilisation and social change.

Addressing these questions would strengthen the empirical foundation of the ELO methodology, while contributing to the continued development of culturally grounded evaluation theory and practice.

Reimagining evaluation from indigenous wisdom

Taken together, the findings suggest that indigenous proverbs do more than enrich existing evaluation practice; they create possibilities for reimagining what evaluation is and how it can be conducted. They offer alternative ways of thinking about knowledge, evidence, accountability, learning and social responsibility that emerge from lived experience and collective wisdom, rather than from abstract methodological prescriptions alone.

The contribution of the ELO methodology is therefore both methodological and philosophical. Methodologically, it provides a systematic process for transforming indigenous wisdom into evaluation knowledge. Philosophically, it demonstrates that indigenous knowledge systems contain coherent and sophisticated understandings of inquiry, valuing and social action. By making these understandings visible and actionable, ELO expands the possibilities for evaluation theory and practice.

Ultimately, this study invites evaluators to move beyond adapting external models towards generating evaluation from culture itself. In doing so, it contributes to a more pluralistic, equitable and intellectually diverse evaluation field – one in which indigenous communities are recognised not only as participants in evaluation, but also as philosophers, theorists and producers of evaluation knowledge.

Conclusion

This article introduced the ELO methodology as a culturally grounded process for transforming indigenous proverbial wisdom into evaluation philosophy, frameworks and approaches. Developed through reflection on the process that led to the SEA, ELO responds to an important methodological gap within evaluation scholarship: the limited availability of systematic approaches for identifying, interpreting and synthesising indigenous evaluative knowledge into coherent philosophical and methodological foundations for evaluation.

The findings demonstrate that proverbs are more than repositories of cultural wisdom or expressions of social values. They embody evaluative reasoning, philosophical assumptions and practical insights concerning inquiry, evidence, participation, accountability, judgement and social

responsibility. Through the sequential processes of extraction, interpretation and philosophical synthesis, these insights can be transformed into explicit ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological beliefs capable of informing culturally grounded evaluation theory and practice.

Beyond its methodological contribution, the study demonstrates that indigenous knowledge systems can generate an evaluation philosophy, rather than merely inform the adaptation of existing evaluation approaches. In doing so, it advances ongoing efforts within the MAE movement to develop evaluation theories and methodologies that emerge from African intellectual traditions and lived realities. The ELO methodology therefore contributes to a shift from critique to construction – from identifying the limitations of externally derived paradigms to creating pathways for the systematic generation of locally grounded evaluation philosophies.

The contribution of ELO extends beyond the Swahili context. Although ELO was illustrated through Swahili proverbs, its methodological logic is transferable to other African and indigenous knowledge traditions. The significance of ELO lies not in the particular philosophy generated from Swahili wisdom, but in the process, it provides for enabling other communities to derive evaluation philosophies, frameworks and approaches from their own cultural resources. In this respect, the methodology offers a practical pathway for expanding the intellectual foundations of evaluation through engagement with diverse knowledge traditions.

More broadly, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonise and pluralise evaluation. By creating a structured pathway through which indigenous communities can generate evaluation philosophy from their own knowledge systems, ELO moves indigenous knowledge from the margins of evaluation discourse towards the centre of evaluation theory production. Rather than positioning communities primarily as sources of data or participants in evaluation, the methodology recognises them as producers of evaluative knowledge, philosophical insight and methodological innovation. In this sense, ELO contributes to epistemic justice by affirming the legitimacy of indigenous intellectual traditions as sources of evaluation theory.

Ultimately, the significance of the ELO methodology lies in its capacity to transform indigenous wisdom into evaluation knowledge. By providing a systematic process for moving from proverbs to evaluative insights and from evaluative insights to evaluation philosophy, the methodology expands the possibilities for generating evaluation from culture, rather than merely adapting evaluation to culture. As evaluation continues to grapple with questions of relevance, equity and epistemic inclusion, ELO offers a pathway towards a more pluralistic, culturally grounded and intellectually diverse field – one enriched by the many ways societies understand value, learning, accountability and social change.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Almas F. Mazigol: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding Acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the public domain.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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