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Decolonizing and indigenizing evaluation in Africa: evidence from Ghana

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Abstract

Purpose – Evaluation philosophies, methods and practices in Ghana and Africa at large have been predominantly Euro-American-centered, with little to no regard for Afrocentric methodologies that are rooted in indigenous norms, values and other cultural realities. Thus, the recent quest for new evaluation knowledge is anchored in cultural values, norms, ideals and relational patterns. The notion is that a holistic understanding of indigenous values and assumptions could aid in developing alternative evaluation theories, methods and procedures for assessing development initiatives.

Design/methodology/approach – Using key informant interviews (KII) and in-depth interviews, supplemented by observations, 32 participants from three traditional areas were interviewed in the Eastern Region, Ghana. Employing a thematic analysis approach, the data were analyzed.

Findings – This paper identified several indigenous evaluation instincts, such as social accountability, relational stakeholders, neighborhood webs, community participation, empowerment, relational information gathering and feedback and consensus building. These key indigenous notions are embedded in the six-sphere traditional governance structures, which can be espoused to indigenize and decolonize evaluation frameworks in Ghana. These evaluative impulses, rooted in the six-sphere framework, when adopted, could greatly complement contemporary evaluation theories, methods and practices.

Research limitations/implications – This paper utilized a qualitative data analysis approach and therefore cannot make generalizations except to attribute the findings to the thirty-two (32) respondents and three (3) traditional areas used as a case study.

Originality/value – This paper concludes by proposing an integrative indigenous relational-decolonial evaluation framework embedded in Ubuntu, Afrocentricity and communitarian knowledge systems, which emphasizes that decolonization and indigenization need political, epistemic and theoretical restructuring.

Keywords Decolonizing, Evaluation, Culture, Indigenous evaluation, Relational evaluation

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Evaluation in Africa has largely been shaped by Euro-American perspectives (Abrahams *et al.*, 2022; Frehiwot, 2022), often giving limited attention to Afrocentric methodologies that are rooted in indigenous philosophies, approaches and practices, and other cultural realities. Nonetheless, the evaluation of indigenous community-based initiatives has solely been done by indigenes, either a selected few or an entire society, which Chilisa *et al.* (2016, p. 318) termed as "relational evaluation". There is philosophical evidence to suggest that the indigenous evaluation (IE) approach was the practice in most traditional communities before

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the advent of contemporary evaluation frameworks (Chilisa and Malunga, 2012; Easton, 2012; Boadu and Ile, 2023). Boadu *et al.* (2020) argued that community-based development (CBD) initiatives were exclusively monitored and evaluated through indigenous relational patterns, social accountability and consensus-building, *inter alia*.

Gaotlhobogwe *et al.* (2018) reasoned that the involvement of Indigenous people and their knowledge systems and values in community-based programs through local practices and concepts could promote a new evaluation framework and ideas, and sustained community development. The aim is not to conjure indigenous philosophical values, ideas, norms and other cultural realities anew in most societies, but rather to unearth what had existed in various cultural philosophies, such as axioms (Easton, 2012) and explore the value it could bring in the ways evaluation is done in community development programs. Given that Afrocentric evaluation paradigms and other culturally responsive evaluation (CRE) practices continue to work well in CBD initiatives, the philosophies need further interrogation.

Moreover, the relational patterns and reporting systems used within the indigenous communities tend to typify the contemporary participatory evaluation approach (Boadu and Ile, 2022). Nonetheless, Cram *et al.* (2013) asserted that there is limited indigenous knowledge (IK) and participation in the evaluations of CBD policies. Boadu and Ile (2022) affirmed that indigenous societies and their evaluation ideas are mostly neglected in the CBD and decision-making processes. Thus, the relevance of cultural values in indigenous decision-making, implementation, information gathering, assessment and evaluation frameworks is not in doubt (Easton, 2012; Cram *et al.*, 2013).

Boadu and Ile (2022) argued that there is a need to incorporate IK and relational stakeholders in CBD programs within the indigenous communities. Besides, the indigenous relational knowledge is deeply rooted in cultural philosophies and competencies that tend to offer an avenue for varying perspectives in the conduct of inquiry within the indigenous communities (Cram *et al.*, 2013; Cloete, 2016). Moreover, the indigenous people have always participated in CBD initiatives within African societies; however, Chilisa *et al.* (2016) observed that IE philosophies are mostly excluded, marginalized and dismissed in contemporary evaluation frameworks.

Evaluation knowledge in Africa tends to be uneven, and there is a power disparity that is substantially skewed towards Euro-American values, theories and practices, to the detriment of Afrocentric values (Cloete and Auriacombe, 2019), and the situation is no different in Ghana, as it has been observed that what needs to be measured and which knowledge systems to use are often influenced by contemporary evaluators and Eurocentric values (Boadu and Ile, 2022). Moreover, Eurocentric values are often used to determine the outcomes, instruments, stakeholders, beneficiaries, what should be assessed and the knowledge systems that inform the evaluation practice. Reversing the inadequate use of cultural values in evaluation frameworks in Ghana, this paper explored various indigenous philosophies that could shape the indigenization of evaluation in Ghana. There is a need to feature IE values and other cultural realities to complement the present conceptualization of evaluation philosophies, approaches and practices in CBD initiatives. Based on the objectives of this paper, the following broad research questions were used to solicit information regarding the indigenization and decolonization of evaluation:

(1) What are the efficacies of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in evaluation activities?

(2) What are the indigenous values, norms, cultures and approaches in evaluation?

(3) What role does IKS play in developing context-specific evaluation approaches?

(4) How can IE notions address the limits of Euro-American evaluation?

(5) What are the pathways to indigenizing evaluation concepts, methods and practices?

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Decolonization and indigenization evaluation discourses in Africa

Empirical review

There are inherent Afrocentric evaluation philosophies that are rooted in indigenous values, norms, ideals and relational patterns that could shape the advancement of a new evaluation knowledge in Africa (Easton, 2012; Gaotlhobogwe *et al*., 2018). The measurement of evaluation outcomes is often rooted in donor-driven accountability evaluation (Chilisa *et al*., 2016), which focuses on compliance and check boxes. The quest among Africa evaluators is to integrate IKS and other cultural realities into the evaluation frameworks (Chilisa and Malunga, 2012; Gaotlhobogwe *et al*., 2018; Abrahams *et al*., 2022). Besides, it has also been observed across continents that cultural values, notions and ideas are becoming some of the core concepts, especially in evaluation and CBD policies within indigenous settings (Hood *et al*., 2015; Bremner and Bowman, 2020).

Decolonization and indigenization of evaluation are being greatly pursued by African evaluators because of the numerous socio-cultural realities within which most public and community development policies are designed, implemented and accessed (Chilisa *et al*., 2016; Boadu, 2022). Chilisa (2015) argued that although IE methodologies in Africa are increasingly being accepted, there is still a gap in the framework, design and implementation. There has been very little consideration of indigenous values and other cultural philosophies in the theories, methods and practices of evaluation in Africa (Chilisa and Malunga, 2012; Boadu, 2022) Ghana is no exception. Nonetheless, the relevance and integration of IK and other cultural ideals are increasingly being promoted in IE in Africa (Easton, 2012; Jeng, 2012; Gaotlhobogwe *et al*., 2018; Boadu and Ile, 2023). Thomas and Parsons (2017) observed that despite the established notions regarding IE, the practices and approaches are still at their developing stages in public policies, donor-funded projects and CBD initiatives.

The indigenous notions are gaining greater recognition in the field of evaluation (Hopson, 2012; Hood *et al*., 2015; Chilisa *et al*., 2016) because IE frameworks emphasize socio-cultural values, norms, proverbs, indigenous political structures, community expectations and other cultural realities into the philosophies, approaches and practices of evaluation (Easton, 2012; Jeng, 2012; Chilisa *et al*., 2016). Moreover, there is a wave of IK in the contemporary practice of evaluation in community development programs in Africa (Chilisa *et al*., 2016) as well as in the community development literature (Muwanga-Zake, 2009; Sillitoe and Marzano, 2009; Sithole, 2016; Bremner and Bowman, 2020). Hood *et al*. (2015) maintained that IE notions acknowledge socio-political, contextual and ecological dimensions in evaluation activities.

It has been argued that there is a need to curb the "wholesale" evaluation approaches by promoting CRE frameworks that are unique to an indigenous society and their peculiar cultural and lived experiences (Chilisa *et al*., 2016; Boadu and Ile, 2023). Cloete (2016) argued that conceiving an IE theory, practice and approaches is an attempt to perceive evaluation from a cultural and contextual specificity. Thus, decolonizing the evaluation approaches requires integrating cultural and context-specific philosophies to allow for local control, influence and ownership of the evaluation activities and their outcomes (Chilisa and Malunga, 2012; Shepherd and Graham, 2020). Culture and context are two inseparable issues that evaluators cannot eschew in community development policies and evaluation activities (Holte-McKenzie *et al*., 2006; Frierson *et al*., 2010; Gaotlhobogwe *et al*., 2018).

Thomas and Parsons (2017) opined that in order to effectively unravel the intricacies related to evaluation activities, CRE paradigms call for an epistemological shift from the contemporary evaluation notions and philosophies. Boadu (2022) affirmed that to better explain some of the outcomes attained in CBD programs and other social intervention initiatives, the integration of the IK into the decision-making process and evaluation activities is key. The integration of indigenous and mainstream evaluation approaches is likely to promote learning, knowledge sharing, ownership and a better understanding of the purpose of evaluation, which includes ensuring the sustainability of CBD (Gaotlhobogwe *et al*., 2018; Boadu and Ile, 2022).

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Culturally sensitive evaluation (CSE) approaches differ from mainstream evaluation because at the center of it are the socio-cultural issues, power disparities within communities, tribal governance systems and state-led local government structures (Bowman, 2019). This tends to influence the implementation of indigenous CBDs and other social policies. Nonetheless, the conventional evaluation approach also recognizes the power disparities in local communities and other development institutions (Baodu and Ile, 2019); thus, the approaches could complement each other. CSE approaches are guided by cultural notions; however, the core value is to integrate IK ideals, notions, perspectives and frameworks into the theories, methods and practices of evaluation (Chilisa *et al*., 2016).

The integration of indigenous lived experiences, ideologies and other socio-cultural realities into evaluation models, techniques and practices is one of the ways indigenous evaluators hope to decolonize evaluation (Samuels and Ryan, 2011; Hood *et al*., 2014; Gaotlhobogwe *et al*., 2018). However, in an effort to design evaluation guidelines that are inclined toward cultural values, the indigenous notions are frequently entangled in overlapping approaches, philosophies and practices from other disciplines, including history, sociology, political science, anthropology and development studies, among others, which tend to disrupt the authenticity (Hood *et al*., 2014; Mertens and Zimmerman, 2015; Chilisa *et al*., 2016; Boadu and Ile, 2022).

Besides, there is a greater interest on the part of indigenous evaluators to explore, develop, advance and build an indigenous evaluative approach into the contemporary practice of evaluation to ensure local empowerment (Fetterman, 2019). However, there is greater uncertainty regarding what constitutes the social change and empowerment in CRE approaches within a dominant cultural group (Brown and Lallo, 2020). Boadu and Ile (2023) argued that indigenously responsive evaluation philosophies provide vague pathways for indigenous or non-indigenous evaluators to follow when evaluating a CBD initiative.

Moreover, Brown and Lallo (2020, p. 1) proposed the indigenous "talking circle" as a pathway for its ability to provide dialogue, and Boadu (2022) affirmed that the framework has a flexible procedure that encourages consensus-building and ensures local participation. The "talking circle" method has the potential to be useful for conducting community-based evaluation since it empowers local participants, takes into account cultural realities, reorganizes the social structure and fosters both community spirit and reconciliation (Chilisa and Malunga, 2012; Chilisa *et al*., 2016; Brown and Lallo, 2020). The "talking circle", according to Brown and Lallo (2020), allows for the assimilation of cultural norms and value systems and contributes to the development of some level of interconnection among community members.

IE approaches are rooted in a "strength-based approach" since they tend to focus on problem-solving (Thomas and Parsons, 2017) rather than the drawbacks associated with the integration of indigenous philosophies into CBD evaluation activities (Boadu, 2022). There is a strong optimism underpinning the strength-based evaluation paradigm; thus, utilizing a strength-based evaluation model will offer both the indigenous and non-indigenous evaluators the opportunity to identify and understand the cultural realities within a particular community that can help in the evaluation of communal activities (Frierson *et al*., 2002).

There is a gradual shift in the literature regarding where IK is moving from the margins to the center of CBD, including evaluation (Odora-Hoppers, 2002; Sillitoe and Marzano, 2009; Easton, 2012; Hood *et al*., 2014). The argument is that context-specific cultural realities, when tapped properly by indigenous and non-indigenous evaluators and development practitioners, may enhance the development evaluation designs and practices (Easton, 2012; Chilisa *et al*., 2016) when evaluating community development initiatives. Thomas and Parsons (2017) argued that the problem is usually the inability of evaluators to recognize, appreciate and understand context-specific cultural philosophies in evaluation. Moreover, diversity in IE is seen as a strength rather than a weakness (Boadu, 2022).

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Conceptual review

Cultural evaluative ideas, such as collaborative evaluation, which is rooted in a variety of indigenous evaluative approaches that engage diverse stakeholders in the design of evaluation activities (Rodríguez-Campos, 2012; Haugen and Chouinard, 2019), participatory evaluation, which is premised on meaningfully engaging stakeholders, including beneficiaries, community members and practitioners in the design, implementation and interpretation of the evaluation outcomes (Cousins *et al.*, 2012), a community-based evaluation which is grounded in the local community context and active participation of community members in the evaluation process, including data collection and a locally-based sense of the evaluation findings (Burian *et al.*, 2019), feminist evaluation which emphasizes gender equity, inclusion of marginalized voices and examines power dynamics that influence evaluation processes (Haylock and Miller, 2016).

Moreover, a mixed-method evaluation that integrates both qualitative and quantitative evaluation approaches to better understand the processes, outcomes and impacts (White *et al.*, 2018), and an inclusive evaluation that tends to integrate the lived experiences of diverse and marginalized groups in the evaluation activities to ensure equitable, representative and socially responsive outcomes (Mertens, 1999). Empowerment evaluation, which focuses on program beneficiaries and other stakeholders and their ability to assess, improve and take ownership of the evaluation processes for continuous learning (Fetterman, 2019). Indigenous relational evaluation that emphasizes the relevance of relations, interconnectedness and social context in the evaluation process (Chilisa *et al.*, 2016) is emerging due to the pitfalls in the Euro-American and donor-driven accountability evaluation approaches. The inclusion of IE ideals and tenets has become vital in understanding evaluation activities in CBD programs (Easton, 2012; Gaotlhobogwe *et al.*, 2018).

CRE as an approach does not claim total uniqueness in the evaluation of CBD projects; however, it agrees with other approaches that are rooted in citizens' empowerment, social accountability, community cohesion, social inclusion, power relations and social justice (Greene, 2005; Fetterman, 2019; Boadu *et al.*, 2020). Evaluation approaches embedded cultural ideals are firmly anchored on an interdisciplinary information acquisition base, mechanisms (Thomas and Parsons, 2017). The evaluation approach provides marginalized stakeholders within the indigenous communities with little to no voice, the power to influence and shape the community development decision-making and evaluation activities (Brown and Lallo, 2020; Chilisa *et al.*, 2016).

Decolonizing evaluation is rooted in politics and wealth. Thus, it has been argued that it is a tedious work because it is rooted in the politics of knowledge production, and what is deemed to be valid and invalid, legitimate and illegitimate (Hopson *et al.*, 2012; Chilisa *et al.*, 2016). Whose knowledge should be considered or discounted? Thus, decolonization evaluation goes beyond the reductionist construct of valid and legitimate knowledge systems (Hopson *et al.*, 2012), often backed by wealth, power dynamics and colonial absurdity, to incorporate context-specific perspectives of what constitutes valid and legitimate (Chilisa *et al.*, 2016). The author hastened to add that knowledge validity must be rooted in local understandings of what is legitimate, including evaluative values and practices (Hopson *et al.*, 2012). Decolonization evaluation must depart from universalized notions and validity systems that are external to an evaluation context, as such frameworks often undermine the authority, influence and lived experiences of the indigenous people. It has been argued that the indigenous viewpoint of validity is often embedded in cultural realities, relational and lived experiences (Kirkhart, 2005). Wilson (2008) asserted that relational accountability, what Chilisa *et al.* (2016) argued as social accountability, is one of the pivotal values at the center of IE.

Collaborative and social inclusion philosophies have been observed to be some of the indigenous values that tend to emphasize equity, diversity of knowledge and employ different viewpoints, allowing for individuals, groups and community participation in the evaluation activities (Chilisa and Malunga, 2012). There is interrelation and interdependence within and among indigenous communities, such that the individual exists because of the community and

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vice versa (Cloete, 2016). Chilisa *et al.* (2016) argued that social activities and ideas within the indigenous settings offer avenues for local community members to actively participate in the evaluation process.

Design and methodology

A qualitative research design rooted in thematic analysis was employed (Charmaz, 2017, p. 34). Data were obtained from indigenous leaders, community development leaders, opinion leaders and local government officials to obtain local perspectives on IE methods used in CBD initiatives in the three traditional areas in the Eastern Region of Ghana (see Table 1). The three study locations were chosen due to the existence of traditional areas (territories of indigenous governance authorities (chieftaincy) headed by a chief or queen), indigenous governance structures, reverence for IKS and other cultural realities that support CBD, local participation and evaluation. A purposive sample strategy (Campbell *et al.*, 2020) was used because it offered a flexible method for choosing case study sites and respondents.

Guided primarily by considerations of internal and construct validity rather than external validity (i.e. generalizability), a multiple case study approach was adopted as the method of inquiry (Stewart, 2012; Mariotto *et al.*, 2014). Central to ensuring rigor in this qualitative study, the researcher applied Lincoln and Guba's (1986) four-dimensional criteria, credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability throughout the research design and execution. These criteria informed careful planning and implementation of key informant and in-depth interviews, ensuring that findings were trustworthy, consistent and grounded in participants' realities.

A multiple case study was particularly suitable for capturing the complexities of indigenous relational evaluation approaches, enabling a deep understanding of the social structures, communal assessment practices and local dynamics within the three indigenous communities studied. The study focused on three traditional areas in the Eastern Region of Ghana, as indicated in Table 1. This setting allowed for a comparative exploration of IE practices across distinct yet culturally interconnected communities. This research project received ethical clearance approval by the University of the Western Cape's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Ethics Reference Number: HS18/6/17).

Table 1. Region, districts, traditional areas and respondents

Region	Districts and traditional areas	Categories	Number of respondents
Eastern Region (ER)	Akuapim North (AN), Akuapim Traditional Council (AN-ATC)	Traditional leaders (sub-divisional leaders, heads of clans)	2
		Community development leaders	4
		Local government officials	4
		Indigenous educators	1
	Akuapim South (AS) Okuapeman Traditional Council (AS-OTC)	Traditional leaders (sub-divisional leaders, clan heads)	2
		Community development leaders	4
		Local government officials	3
		Indigenous educators	1
	Suhum Municipality (SM) (Akyem-Abuakwa Traditional Area) (SM-AATA)	Traditional leaders (sub-divisional leaders, clan heads)	2
		Community development leaders	5
		Local government officials	3
		Indigenous educators	1
Total			*32*

Source(s): Authors' own work

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Data collection instruments

Key informant interviews (KII) were used to gather data from knowledgeable community members in the three indigenous communities (Elmendorf and Luloff, 2006). Using KII, interviews were conducted with six indigenous leaders and customary leaders who have a wealth of knowledge about indigenous relational patterns, social accountability structures, information delivery systems, norms and other cultural philosophies. Three indigenous educators with rich knowledge in indigenous knowledge and evaluation practices within an indigenous community were interviewed. To substantiate the information from the six indigenous leaders, ten (10) local government representatives were also interviewed using KII.

In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide to solicit data from 13 community development leaders. This tool was employed because it provided a two-way communication medium between the respondents and the researcher (Creswell, 2017), offering the former the opportunity to express their perspectives on indigenous assessment values, reporting and CBD initiatives within their respective traditional areas. Dialogues and consensus-building within traditional societies are of great importance; thus, the approach offered respondents the opportunity to address issues related to decision-making, CBD initiatives and their implementation and evaluation.

A complete participant observation was used, where the field researcher observes without participating in the indigenous activities. This data collection approach was employed in some instances to gather information by systematically noting and recording the flow of social activities within the three case study areas (Emerson, 2015). This data collection tool assisted the researcher in observing interactions, the flow of information and communication networks, feedback channels and relational stakeholders within the three indigenous settings. This approach made it possible to keep track of several social gatherings within the indigenous settings.

To ensure a robust interpretation, documentary evidence was used to complement the field data. This paper utilised a documentary analysis approach (Bowen, 2009), to examine relevant documentary literature, including the Chieftaincy Act, 2008 (Act No. 759), Local Government Act, 1993 (No. 462), Ghana National Decentralization Action Plan (GNDAP) and other pertinent literature, was analyzed.

Data analysis

Employing a thematic analysis approach, the field data (transcripts) (Clarke and Braun, 2013) were analyzed. Every step of this method of data processing, including familiarization, summarizing and paraphrasing, coding, categorization and triangulation, was thoroughly examined as guided by the study of Turner *et al*. (2017) and Campbell *et al*. (2020). The initial in-depth familiarization and interpretation of the data generated a comprehensive and objective synopsis for further analysis. Inductive themes generated from the field data were used (Thomas, 2006) to find patterns and linkages between the themes. Moreover, prior knowledge and background studies of the subject under study also assisted in explaining some of the themes that emerged.

Qualitative data analysis approaches exist and are applied depending on research objectives and the nature of the data (Campbell *et al*., 2020; Clarke and Braun, 2013; Turner *et al*., 2017). This paper adopted the analytical sequence outlined by Berg (2001, p. 240). The process began with the collation of field notes and the transcription of audio-recorded interviews. This was followed by the inductive development of data codes derived directly from the field data. These codes were then transformed into broader labels or themes. Subsequently, themes, labels and categories were organized by identifying and sorting similar phrases, patterns, relationships, as well as points of convergence and divergence. The fragmented categories and labels were further examined and refined into coherent and manageable transcripts to delineate patterns, ideas and processes. Finally, the identified patterns were carefully interpreted and situated within existing literature, theories and analytical frameworks to

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construct meaningful insights (Berg, 2001, p. 240). Nonetheless, it has been argued that thematic analysis tends to seek to understand the empirical material rather than know it (Clarke and Braun, 2013).

Findings and discussion

The study revealed that there are indigenous relational evaluation systems from the various indigenous relations and intersections that filter norms, values and other cultural realities from the bottom (individuals) to the top (indigenous authorities) within the traditional societies. From the indigenous people (citizenry) to family heads, clan and other development leaders, sub-divisional leaders, the indigenous council and eventually to the indigenous authorities, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Indigenous relational governance structures and evaluation

It was identified that the indigenous governance relational structures typify the cultural realities existing in traditional settings. There are pertinent indigenous evaluative keys that are ingrained not only in cultural norms, beliefs, values, concepts and practices but also in the relational structures. The flow of indigenous people's participation in community development activities, reporting, assessment and feedback structures is embedded in the six layers as illustrated in Figure 1. The flow is from the smaller units within the indigenous communities, comprising the individual members and family, to the paramountcy

> . . . community-based development activities are often initiated by the indigenous people with support from the traditional authorities . . . local development initiatives are planned, executed, and assessed using the indigenous relational structures and other cultural systems such as "communal labour" and gatherings [AATC2, Traditional Leader]

The interview extract above disclosed that at any time there are development activities, various local levels of participation begin from the initiation of the project to the decision making,

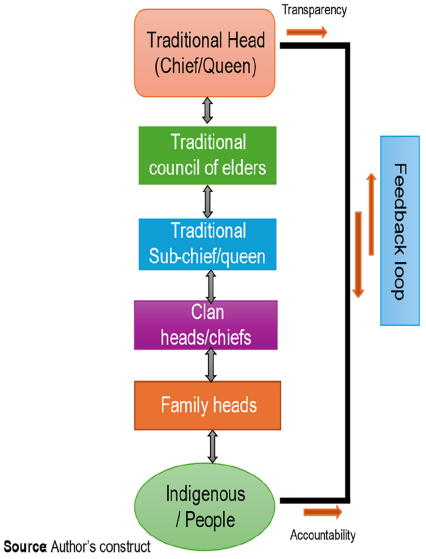

Figure 1. Six spheres of indigenous governance structures and reporting and community/citizens monitoring and evaluation structure. Source: Authors' own work

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through to citizen monitoring and evaluation activities. It was identified that through the family, clan and other community heads' meetings and gatherings, information is gathered for the making of indigenous decisions, planning, execution and evaluation activities. It was identified that the governance systems, starting from the indigenous people to the traditional leader (paramountcy), as illustrated in Figure 1 is the pathways through which local decisions are taken.

> Community development matters are often initiated by the people through their immediate heads before it goes through the various layers within the relational patterns, before the final decision is taken at the paramountcy in consultation with the council of elders [OTC_3, Traditional Leader]

It was acknowledged that indigenous people often tend to be the initiators of community development activities, the paramountcy is the final decision-making authority after the various levels of consultation are arrived at within the sex layers of decision-making. The aspiration of the indigenous communities becomes apparent through the existing experiential knowledge, values, norms and other cultural philosophies that are agreed upon through heads of family and community gatherings.

Indigenous relational patterns and social networks

It was identified that within the indigenous setting, there are many authorities, including traditional leaders, sub-divisional chiefs, clan and other local development leaders, family heads, as well as other social and neighborhood networks. These indigenous relations are everyday realities that exist within the indigenous communities and serve as the intermediaries, connections, between the indigenous people, the traditional authorities and other state-led local government development agencies. Using these relational and neighborhood networking pathways, information and other relevant community resources can channel their view, positions and ambitions from the community level to the tribal/ indigenous government, as expressed by a traditional leader in the interview extract below;

> We use the indigenous information systems such as the "town crier", community durbars, local leaders' representation, clan/tribe representation, and other ways to gather information, reporting, and assessment [OTC_1, Traditional Leader]

The relational path tends to connect the various indigenous community members and other social community groupings, reporting and evaluating every decision made by the traditional leadership in each stage. The relational evaluation approach is deeply drawn into indigenous politics. The indigenous reporting and monitoring framework on the face value indicates some level of power dynamics between each of the six layers; however, the local people, the family and clan heads tend to have enormous power to influence the decision-making and evaluation activities. A community development leader expressed this in the interview extract below.

> They [indigenous people] have an eye on every community-based development project, and they voluntarily participate, and assess them daily [$COTC_1$, Community development member].

The various levels of relation portals involve some level of power differentials between the tribal government and the indigenous people in determining the evaluation activities. The power dynamics framework in the relational and neighbourhood networks tends to set the evaluation agendas; it further influences the initial decision-making, the pointers to measure, the systems to be used, the philosophy and practices.

Indigenous relational stakeholders in the evaluation activities

It was evident during the field study that some multi-layered traditional structures and stakeholders utilised indigenous philosophies and ideals in the design of community development programs and monitoring. It was further observed that the participation of the

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indigenous people in the relational evaluation methods and practices tends to be voluntary, as reiterated by a community development leader below.

> . . . indigenous relations are innately embedded in the indigenous community, and the various groupings are interconnected and constitute the community stakeholder networks [COTC1, Community development member].

It was identified that despite the multiple layers of indigenous stakeholders that comprise sub-divisional heads, chiefs, youth groupings, women groupings, clan heads, family heads, community development leaders, individual indigenous members and other indigenous groupings such as farmers' associations, *inter alia*, there is a sense of oneness among them. A traditional leader further expressed that;

> There is a sense of oneness within the indigenous societies. It transcends coexistence, cooperation, and competition to interdependence [OTC1, Traditional Leaders].

These indigenous groupings constitute the relational stakeholders and other social networks within the indigenous communities. A community development leader expressed that there is camaraderie among the indigenous people in the interview extract below.

> Development initiatives, decision-making, and assessment activities centre on a collaboration between the traditional establishment and the indigenous people and other groupings in the community [COTC4, Community development leader]

At the individual level, the indigenous people's voluntary participation in the indigenous community gathering, communal labour and local collective networks is rooted in camaraderie. The indigenous values used as the benchmarks for the assessment are agreed upon by both the indigenous authority and various indigenous groupings, as a customary leader expressed this in the interview extract below.

> Indigenous leaders, from the family heads to the paramountcy ensure that all relevant community stakeholders, including youth groups, women groups, religious leaders, and other local groupings, play active roles in the community development activities from the initiation to delivery and monitoring [ATC_2, Traditional Leader].

Indigenous information gathering, dissemination and feedback

It was revealed that there are various forms of information gathering and distribution, which include talking circles, community gatherings, traditional durbars, family grouping and local social networks that greatly help in the indigenous decision-making, reporting and gathering of information. These indigenous mechanisms tend to ensure that there is community accountability, transparency and better reporting. A Traditional Leader emphasized that;

> We use family meetings, community durbars/gatherings), festival and other indigenous gatherings as communication channels to provide feedback that enhances community reporting, assessment processes [OTC1, Traditional Leader].

It was revealed that there are two weeks of indigenous feedback and a forty-day feedback and reporting by the paramountcy within the five levels of reporting, as depicted in Figure 1. From the family level through the various bridges, either bottom-up or top-down reporting and feedback systems. The relational reporting and evaluation are further augmented by the fortnightly and 40-day feedback reporting from the five interrelated phases of indigenous decision-making and evaluation.

Despite the varying forms of information gathering, reporting, dissemination and evaluation within and among the five interconnected stages, there is also the annual indigenous reporting and feedback from the indigenous leaders, which occurs during the

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annual festival for the indigenous people of Akuapim in the Eastern Region of Ghana. An educationalist who has enormous knowledge of the customary ways of doing things expressed that;

> . . . At this gathering of such a festival, the chief and his councils give feedback and report to the entire community. [IE_2 Indigenous Educator].

The indigenous authorities report and give feedback to their people regarding any development initiative within the traditional and local government area. The indigenous people also have the opportunity to interrogate and evaluate the information given by the traditional authorities.

Indigenous consensus-building and examination of information

It was identified that deeply rooted in the indigenous setting is the idea of consensus building, which focuses on community spirit, cooperation and collaboration. Through the indigenous relational paths and social networks, as illustrated in the framework, CBD decisions are taken and co-owned by the people and traditional leaders. Information regarding any community activities is gathered, in part, through consensus building between and among the six layers, and it is more focused on the philosophy of collectivism rather than individualism and expert-driven, as often associated with mainstream monitoring and evaluation activities.

> The consensus-building emanates from the various units within the traditional society. It may start from the authorities or from the family level through good communication and social networks that link each of the level. Family heads meet with their leaders to deliberate on any matter, and it is passed on to the clan and subsequently the divisional heads and chiefs [OTC_1 Traditional Leader].

A traditional leader from the AATC area further reiterated that;

> Frequent neighbourhood and community meetings are also utilised. "People-people" or word-of-mouth communication also helps to build an effective local consensus and generate a wide range of feedback around a particular social intervention programme [$AATC_1$ Traditional Leader].

It was identified that the selection of key pointers to measure is agreed upon in the indigenous setting through consensus building. The six levels within the indigenous context have various intrinsic harmony that enhances knowledge acquisition and dissemination. Consensus building is key in the indigenous principle for indigenous selection of indicators and how to measure analysis. A traditional leader reiterated the importance of consensus-building in the indigenous settings.

> Consensus-building emerges from the multiple units within traditional society and may originate either from customary authorities or at the family level, facilitated by effective communication and interconnected social networks across these levels [OTC1 Traditional Leader].

Despite the hierarchical leadership structure within the indigenous societies, the power differential between the individual and the indigenous authorities is one of mutual respect, which tends to enhance the indigenous participatory evaluation paradigms.

Social accountability, trust and spirituality

It was revealed that within the indigenous societies, accountability is built through mutual trust and spirituality. Leaders entrusted with positions are accountable to both the living and the ancestors. The ancestors are consulted for divine direction, while the people are consulted for practical building of consensus to ensure transparency. Both are done to obtain approval from both the ancestor and the living, as opined by a traditional leader in the quote below.

> . . . decision making, planning, and assessment in the indigenous settings is deep-rooted in both spiritual and practical activities where leaders consult their ancestors and the indigenes for direction

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> and to build consensus to ensure accountability and to obtain approval from both [$AATA_3$, Traditional Leaders].

It was revealed that traditional belief and trust systems serve three purposes: first, to understand and appreciate the traditional belief systems and adhere to all the duties and responsibilities of the ancestral and indigenous people; second, to recognize and apply the differences in indigenous epistemologies as these relate to community development and evaluation. A community development leader expressed that;

> We pour libations to begin a community initiative and complete such in the same manner. It has very few mystical aspects; it is just to ensure that those who are entrusted with the traditional leadership rule in integrity, be accountable and transparent to the dead, living, and unborn. [$COTC_4$, Community Development Leader].

Thirdly, to highlight the experiential knowledge and insights in the traditional societies that are routinely used in the indigenous communities to ensure some level of sureness, loyalty, camaraderie and cohesion in the community development initiatives and evaluation

Discussion

Decolonizing and indigenizing evaluation requires restructuring of power relations among development partners, donors, state-led development agencies, evaluators and indigenous communities. Central to this transformation is questioning who defines what is evaluated, how evaluation is conducted, whose knowledge counts and for what purposes evaluation is undertaken. Mainstream evaluation theories, methods and practices have largely favored Euro-American epistemologies and donor-driven accountability systems, often sidelining indigenous perspectives, values and lived experiences (Easton, 2012; Chilisa *et al.*, 2016; Boadu and Ile, 2023).

The six-sphere relational evaluation and reporting framework mirrors several indigenous evaluative philosophies that focus on relationality, collective responsibility and social accountability. The bottom-up flow of information from individuals to traditional authorities echoes Ubuntu's emphasis on collective dialogue and consensus-building. The framework is deeply rooted in Afrocentricity, which prioritizes indigenous cultural values, local governance mechanisms and community-based knowledge production in governance, evaluation and decision-making. Communitarian theoretical lens was identified, which aligns with communal good, social harmony, shared responsibility and community cohesion within the indigenous governance systems. Thus, evaluation must shift towards community-centered, indigenously grounded and participatory approaches that empower indigenous people as co-creators, valid producers of indigenous evaluative knowledge and not as mere passengers in the evaluation activities.

The six-sphere framework reflects the principles of communitarianism, where the collective interests and shared values guide decision-making and social accountability structures. Thus, evaluation within the indigenous settings is driven by social practices embedded in everyday relationships and other social activities. This aligns with arguments that indigenization of evaluation requires the utility of context-specific socio-cultural ideals in the evaluation activities or the integration of cultural philosophies and practices into contemporary evaluation frameworks (Chilisa *et al.*, 2016; Gaotlhobogwe *et al.*, 2018; Boadu and Ile, 2023). Indigenous communities should actively participate in and co-construct evaluation activities, and these must be grounded in their socio-cultural realities. Thus, evaluation should not be a donor-driven exercise but rooted in indigenous epistemologies and community-centered practices.

Evaluation within indigenous settings is rooted in everyday social activities; thus, context and socio-cultural values are critical factors in indigenizing evaluation. Both indigenous and non-indigenous evaluators must appreciate that evaluation does not occur in a vacuum but is

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shaped by cultural realities, belief systems, power relations and social institutions. The six-sphere indigenous governance structures, reporting and community/citizen monitoring and evaluation framework emphasized that evaluation within indigenous settings is embedded in everyday organizational and other cultural realities, relational power structures ranging from the indigenous people to traditional leaders and competing institutional logics that shape governance and accountability practices across the six layers. A paradigm shift is required, moving away from universalized evaluation models toward context-specific frameworks that prioritize cultural relevance and community empowerment. Consequently, indigenizing evaluation should be portrayed as an essential alteration that affects knowledge production and authority in evaluation practices, rather than merely a methodological shift. Besides, there is a need to also reconsider who determines evaluation primacies, conducts the assessments and interprets the findings. Scholarship consistently highlights that culturally responsive and IE frameworks must be grounded in local contexts, as culture fundamentally influences how knowledge is generated, interpreted and utilised (see Chilisa and Malunga, 2012; Easton, 2012; Hood *et al.*, 2015; Bowman and Dodge-Francis, 2018; Bowman, 2019).

Indigenization of evaluation places cultural inclusion at its core and requires a shift from mainstream frameworks to community empowerment-based and strength-based evaluation approaches. While there may be some lingering uncertainties surrounding indigenizing evaluation, the approach focuses on what local communities possess and culturally appropriate measurement and values of success. Indicators should be developed through community consensus rather than imposed through a top-down, predetermined system of measurement. The six-sphere model advances IE theory by demonstrating how evaluation practices are grounded in relational governance systems that prioritize consensus, community participation and social accountability. It also recognized that Afrocentric evaluation approaches support culturally rooted methodologies such as communal dialogue, participatory observation and indigenous leadership structures, and the six-sphere framework has been identified as an Afrocentric governance and evaluative system rooted in legitimizing indigenous relational authority and local social accountability networks. This makes the framework useful because it considers indigenization from an epistemic perspective and not necessarily as methodological restructuring. Thus, the inclusion of indigenous people in the evaluation process is as important as the evaluation outcomes themselves. Evaluation activities must also align with existing indigenous relational structures, reinforcing collective decision-making and shared responsibility. The finding aligns with Boadu and Ile (2019), who reasoned that there must be a shift from the predominantly top-down, linear and few expert-driven approach to a communal approach that employs a multiplicity of factors and ideals in devising a solution for social change.

It was identified that the IE approaches prioritize co-ownership, communal learning and collaboration for social change over expert-driven, externally controlled processes that are detrimental to the local people. The approach draws on epistemological principles and social values such as inclusion, cohesion, empowerment, consensus-building, community spirit, neighbourhood networks, power-sharing and other context-specific cultural realities. Scholarships have argued that there is an enormous repository of ideas, techniques and philosophies found in IKS with several evaluation impulses (see Samuels and Ryan, 2011; Mertens and Zimmerman, 2015; Chilisa *et al.*, 2016; Brown and Lallo, 2020). These values strengthen evaluation frameworks by embedding them within indigenous social systems and collective aspirations. It has been argued that an evaluation culture develops when there is active local community involvement in sharing ideas, co-learning and capacity building (Holte-McKenzie *et al.*, 2006; Tarsilla, 2014; Vernooy *et al.*, 2006). The six-sphere indigenous evaluative framework aligns with consensus-rooted evaluation practices, which are also typified by Ubuntu philosophies, because evaluation is embedded in the six social relationships, indigenous governance structures and shared responsibilities among community members. The framework challenged the linear and expert-driven evaluation methods by acknowledging that evaluation is a social activity within the indigenous setting;

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thus, outcomes are socially constructed and culturally placed. In contrast to linear evaluation frameworks, IE recognizes that local communities comprise interconnected actors, institutions and social processes that shape development processes and outcomes.

IE systems are inherently non-linear and adaptive. They reflect the reality that social change is unpredictable and influenced by numerous interacting cultural, political and institutional factors. Indigenous communities are embedded in complex networks of actors and institutions that inform evaluation design and implementation (see Figure 2). Consequently, evaluation frameworks must remain flexible and responsive to local dynamics rather than rigidly adhering to predefined pathways, measurements and outcomes. The complexity-aware perspective of IE distinguishes the approach from Euro-American evaluation frameworks that tend to prioritize linearity and standardization. Community spirit, collaboration and constant consultation are essential features of indigenized evaluation. The six-sphere model resonates with relational evaluation philosophies as observed by Chilisa *et al.* (2016), which was also identified to be common in the three indigenous traditions, where social activities, such as evaluation, are understood through neighborhood networks. The model illustrates how evaluation, accountability and knowledge flow through relational networks rather than isolated actors. Active participation by individual community members, relational stakeholders and other CBD people strengthens evaluation sustainability and relevance. The finding is consistent with other evaluation activities in CBD initiatives in another part of Africa, where authors realized that active local participation has the potential to sustain the evaluation process (see Holte-McKenzie *et al.*, 2006; Tengan and Aigbavboa, 2017; Boadu and Ile, 2019). Effective IE processes are co-owned and rely on shared learning, transparent relational reporting and continuous feedback that empower communities and enhance local capacity.

Figure 2. Circles of indigenous institutions and factors that influence evaluation. Source: Authors' own work

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IE is deeply embedded in everyday social activities, cultural norms and relational networks, which tend to measure success and outcome qualitatively within the local settings. In contrast, contemporary evaluation tends to privilege quantitative methods, log-frame approaches and donor accountability, often failing to measure indigenous social realities and cultural meanings as observed by Chilisa *et al.* (2016). It was identified that diversity within the indigenous setting is viewed as a strength that enriches evaluation through multiple perspectives from several local stakeholders, making it flexible and adaptive to socio-cultural differences. Nonetheless, the evaluation approach acknowledges that social and cultural systems are complex and layered but manageable because it emphasizes communal problem-solving and contextual understanding of cultural realities. IE seeks to understand and respond to social realities as they unfold.

Indigenous communities possess rich sources of evaluative knowledge embedded in lived experience, cultural practices and collective networks. IKS are foundational to indigenized evaluation because they encourage continuous knowledge acquisition, recognizing learning as both a means and an outcome of the evaluation process. Indigenous evaluative impulses found in the knowledge systems should be gradually espoused through culturally appropriate means rather than rushed to meet donor timelines and accountability frameworks. Indigenizing evaluation requires deep-rooted grounding in local philosophies that emphasize mutual understanding, collectivism, social cohesion and shared responsibility, while remaining flexible and receptive to incorporating other evaluative approaches. The finding aligns with other scholarship where authors have argued that IE should be grounded in local ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies (see Chilisa *et al.*, 2016; Gaotlhobogwe *et al.*, 2018; Brown and Lallo, 2020).

This paper advances the indigenization of evaluation philosophies, approaches and practices by emphasizing the need to restructure power relations in the evaluation knowledge production and reposition indigenous communities as key co-creators of knowledge rather than passive stakeholders. Moreover, this paper challenged the dominance of Euro-American, donor-driven evaluation models and proposes context-specific, culturally grounded frameworks rooted in indigenous notions and other socio-cultural realities. Again, by highlighting some of the core indigenous philosophies such as community participation, co-ownership, collaboration and relational learning, this paper has expanded the theoretical understandings of evaluation beyond linear, quantitative and expert-driven to a qualitative and social approach. It also introduces complexity-aware, adaptive and CRE systems that prioritize communal values, lived experiences and IKS in shaping evaluation processes, outcomes and measures of success.

The framework revealed that state-led local government institutions, traditional authorities and indigenous communities tend to negotiate power, suitability and knowledge production through culturally responsive practices that depart from evaluation as an unbiased expert-driven exercise. The proposed indigenous-decolonial evaluation systems challenge Euro-American bureaucratic logics that follow some set standards and external or donor-driven accountability evaluation to focus on communal norms, relational governance and culturally embedded forms of organizational learning. Evaluation is a contested organizational field shaped by power dynamics between and among stakeholders, culturally grounded and institutionally complex as found within the indigenous governance structures embedded in the six-sphere framework.

Signposts for the Future

This paper grasped that to decolonize and indigenize evaluation, there is a need to critically consider the following issues.

(1) Evaluation must be linked to indigenous values, norms and other cultural practices

(2) It must shift from donor-driven accountability to community-driven evaluations.

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(3) The six spheres-indigenously rooted systems should be aligned with donor expectations for participation, reporting, accountability, feedback and evidence-based evaluation.

(4) Strength-based evaluations which focus on cultural relevance, and not problems.

(5) Inclusion of indigenous people in the evaluation process is as essential as the outcomes.

(6) Consensus measurement of the indicators and not predetermined top-down indicators.

(7) Evaluation activities should consider existing indigenous relational structures.

(8) Inclusive by giving the powerless (indigenous) a voice to influence the evaluation.

(9) Shift from external power holdings to a community-based power-sharing approach.

(10) Evaluation co-constructed and co-owned by the indigenous community members.

(11) IKS are the repositories of indigenous evaluative ideals.

Conclusion

Decolonizing and indigenizing evaluation requires an epistemological and methodological shift from the theories, methods and practices that are heavily skewed towards Euro-American evaluation paradigms. Evaluation should be understood as not merely a methodological exercise, but as a socio-cultural activity embedded within specific indigenous contexts. Thus, the need to alter the entrenched power dynamics between donors, governments, evaluators and indigenous communities in designing an evaluation system that is culturally inclusive, contextually relevant and socially transformative. Evaluation philosophies must be grounded in IKS, values, norms and indigenous governance structures, while emphasizing co-design, co-ownership and shared power. It must prioritize indigenously-driven over donor-driven accountability evaluation. It must adopt a strength-based approaches that focus on IE innovations and capacities within the local settings rather than shortfalls. When cultural and contextual factors become central, IE will enable meaningful participation, foster community empowerment and enhance the weight and sustainability of CBD activities. IE is non-linear and often shaped by several social actors, relational networks and cultural philosophies; thus, learning is an essential value of its practice. The integration of these indigenous social factors and epistemologies should not be viewed as limitations but as opportunities to rethink dominant evaluation paradigms. Culture and relational ways of knowing in the indigenous settings offer pathways for accommodating multiple ways of knowing, being and valuing. By incorporating indigenous ways of knowing and community-centered learning, evaluation can become a tool for empowering marginalized voices and ensuring development sustainability. Decolonizing evaluation, therefore, demands a deliberate shift towards culturally grounded, community-owned and participatory evaluation practices that enhance accountability, learning, transparency and sustainable evaluation outcomes. Moreover, the six-sphere framework could also be advantageous in the indigenization process since it echoes indigenous philosophies that emphasize relationality, collective responsibility and community accountability. Grounded in Ubuntu, Afrocentricity and communitarian values, it shows evaluation as a relational, participatory activity embedded in indigenous governance systems.

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