Beyond Ubuntu: Nnoboa and Sankofa as Decolonizing and Indigenous Evaluation Epistemic Foundations from Ghana

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Background: Evaluation is an increasingly vital component of community and economic development projects in Africa. Yet questions remain about how relevant most dominant evaluation approaches are for the African evaluation context. Within the Made in Africa evaluation (MAE) approach, ubuntu is frequently cited as an African philosophical concept with salience to MAE. There is a need to further expand and explicate other African philosophies that can serve as epistemological guideposts for African evaluation—and other decolonizing, Indigenous evaluation approaches more broadly.

Purpose: Drawing on Ghanaian epistemologies and frameworks, the purpose of this paper is to propose the Nnoboa system of communal collaboration in farming and industry, as well as the notion of Sankofa as a traditional philosophical concept that interrupts and challenges hegemonic Eurocentric notions of the linearity of time, to yield a Ghanaian Indigenous knowledge of evaluation.

Setting: Not applicable.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: This conceptual study draws on literature on culturally responsive evaluation (CRE) and MAE and (from beyond the field of evaluation) descriptions of Nnoboa and Sankofa to propose a conceptual synthesis applicable to decolonizing, Indigenous evaluation.

Data Collection and Analysis: Not applicable.

Findings: We propose that Nnoboa and Sankofa represent an addition to the decolonizing and Indigenous evaluation knowledge base, building on and going beyond the reliance of CRE and MAE on ubuntu. We propose this Ghanaian approach has potential applications across MAE and CRE more broadly.

Introduction

Evaluation is an increasingly vital component of community and economic development projects in Africa. Governments and other decision-makers have long required evaluative evidence for purposes of accountability in relation to international donor agencies, and also for making choices that ideally support the development of the various countries (Porter & Goldman, 2013). Yet this raises the question: How relevant are most evaluation approaches for the African evaluation context? The localization of evaluation within the African context to meet and serve the pertinent cultural needs and nature of how programs work in that part of the globe has been at the center of debate in recent years. Deep concerns have been raised by local African evaluators about the Euro-American evaluation standards imposed on them (Chilisa, 2015). According to Ajei (2007), "[W]estern science has portrayed itself as the only universally valid framework for the explanation and prediction of natural and social phenomena" (p. 112). Hood, Hopson and Kirkhart (2015) advocate for a culture-based evaluation, stating, "Evaluation must be designed and carried out in a way that is culturally responsive to values and beliefs, many of which may be context-specific" (p. 283). Such a paradigm can reflect the needs and institutions of marginalized communities.

Thus, since 2007, what is known as Made in Africa evaluation (MAE) has been gaining traction on the landscape of international evaluation. MAE was first grounded in Southern Africa, with *Ubuntu* being the most cited philosophical framework underlying the approach. This paradigm is founded on Indigenous knowledge systems and is culturally responsive to the sociocultural and political dynamics of Africa, which are at odds with the cultural aspirations of the Global North (Chilisa, 2015; Wehipeihana & McKegg, 2018).

Within the four primary purposes of MAE, the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) acknowledges the diversity in African "cultures, religions, languages, histories, gender, ethnicity … and data collection methods such as storytelling, folklore, music, dance, oral traditions and the use of African languages" (Chilisa, 2015, p. 15). This, in principle, exposes the lack of equity and balance in the representation of epistemologies in the formulation of international evaluation standards. Significantly, the purposes also underscore the rationale to develop a more diverse and regionally focused culturally responsive evaluation (CRE) approach to evaluation in Africa. In that spirit, this paper therefore focuses on CRE through the lens of

Ghana in sub-Saharan Africa, as applied through the *Nnoboa* system of communal collaboration in farming and industry. This paper also proposes the notion of *sankofa* as a traditional philosophical concept within the Indigenous epistemology in Ghana that supports Ghanaian Indigenous knowledge of evaluation.

Culturally Responsive Evaluation (CRE)

Hopson (2009) defines CRE as "a theoretical, conceptual, and inherently political position that includes the centrality of and [attunement] to culture in the theory and practice of evaluation" (p. 431). This approach to evaluation aligns with the constructivist paradigm, which puts stakeholders at the center of the evaluation process (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). Stake (1991) refers to evaluation as responsive if

> it orients more directly to program activities than to program intents, if it responds to audience requirements for information, and if the different value perspectives of the people at hand are referred to in reporting the success and failure of the program. (p. 65)

CRE" therefore simply refers to conducting an evaluation of a project based on how it fits into the culture of a particular setting. Culture in this context is "a cumulative body of learned and shared behavior, values, customs and beliefs common to a particular group or society" (Frierson et al., 2002, p. 63), while "evaluation" can be understood to mean establishing the merit, worth or value of a program (Scriven, 1991). Coalescing these composite parts of CRE, Frierson, Hood, and Hughes (2002) depict CRE as the method of evaluating a program wherein the culture of the setting is made to reflect in the program being conducted. Moving toward a new methodology and, for that matter, a culturally responsive program, requires a criterion that deviates from the normal positivist notions of objectivity and detachment. CRE is thus frequently favored in the constructivist and transformative paradigms. Evaluative criteria consist of "thinking" and reasoning that underlie the determination of the value or worth of a program (Davidson, 2014). A typical and widely referenced CRE example has been the Maori concept of *whakawhanaungatanga* (Wehipeihana & McKegg, 2018). The perspectives and methods are based on culturally based heuristics that involve "spiritual, physical and psychological realms" (p. 100). Maori stand for sharing, agreement, and understanding diverse perspectives to make

decisions. This approach puts stakeholders at the center of the process.

Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE)

The push for African-relevant evaluation is reported to have started over two decades ago in the 1990s, when African evaluators and researchers protested the imposition of Euro-American standards for measuring culturally sensitive programs in Africa (Chilisa, 2015). However, the call for an Indigenous culturally driven evaluation became more explicit in 2007 at the Niamey conference in Niger, where proponents of MAE pushed for a more Indigenous culturally responsive approach to evaluation for Africa. Drawing from the purposes and content for AfrEA that were proposed in the AfrEA 2007 and 2013 conference proceedings, MAE can be understood as an evaluation approach that "includes the development of specific evaluation strategies that account for the local context that define locally sound and relevant development success measures" (Chilisa, 2015, p. 15). According to Gwaravanda and Indofirepi (2020), there have been a section of African researchers who believe that Africa should dictate its own "content, methodology and form" in order to earn the adjective "African" (p. 2), and that "African philosophy should avoid the Eurocentric pitfall of disregarding African culture[,] because the practice contradicts the very foundation upon which African philosophy must be constructed." It is therefore significant to acknowledge the unique epistemology, ontology, and axiology related to African evaluation. A pioneer in Afrocentric evaluation methodology, Asante (1990), in opposition to Eurocentric methodology, situates a rather Afrocentric methodology on four basic beliefs concerning the responsibilities of researchers in connection with methodology, as cited by Reviere (2001) as follows:

> [Researchers] (a) hold themselves responsible for uncovering hidden, subtle, racist theories that may be embedded in current methodologies; (b) work to legitimize the centrality of African ideals and values as a valid frame of reference for acquiring and examining data; and (c) maintain inquiry rooted in a strict interpretation of place. (p. 712)

Africans are noted to generate knowledge through what Carroll (2008) describes as "Affect-Symbolic-Imagery," which thrives on elements like proverbs, music, folktales, rituals, symbols and so on (as also stated by Chilisa in many of her works).

Etta and Mogu (2012) place proverbs at the crux of African epistemology. According to them, proverbs are the bedrock of knowledge upon which the development of humans can be attained. Applying proverbs in the methodology of evaluation in Africa, Easton (2012) writes that proverbs are a significant piece in the evaluation process, and that proverbs themselves promote a participatory approach to evaluation that reflects the culture of Africa. Another source of knowledge has been symbols. A typical example is *Adinkra* symbols, which originate from the Akan ethnic group of Ghana and are predominately used in Ghana. African axiology—axiology being what constitutes ethics and thus is linked to value—hinges on what Segobye refers to as "humanness or personhood" (2000, p. 3), which Chilisa considers also as "respect for others or oneself" (2015, p. 21). The ontology of Africa revolves around the existence of communality and cooperation, which encompasses physical and spiritual lives (Carroll, 2008).

Situating MAE in the African research context, Muwanga-Zake (2009) Indigenized a research study on evaluation that was carried out on the locally focused goals and objectives of a program whose purpose was to ascertain the priorities and needs of teachers in a computer program. The researchers engaged the African concept of Ubuntu to assess the needs and priorities of the participants. The results indicated that the teachers prioritized computer programs that were geared toward addressing local needs. Ubuntu, like the Maori concept mentioned above, thrives on sharing among a community (family) that identifies with a common culture that is set on common values, beliefs, norms, and so on—a common axiology of African communities. Muwanga-Zake (2009) indicates that Ubuntu involves the act of an evaluator appreciating the values of the community, understanding their needs, and being ready to share in their beliefs, history, and culture, which transforms the evaluator into a Muntu so that the stakeholders will join into a cooperative relationship with the evaluator.

A Ghanaian Culturally Responsive Evaluation Framework

Ghana shares a relatively similar epistemology, ontology, and axiology with other African nations. Within the Ghanaian context, Nnoboa and Adinkra (symbols) are established traditional concepts that permeate the agricultural, social, religious, and

economic fabric of the people of Ghana (Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al., 2016). Nnoboa, as a concept for evaluation, reflects the Ghanaian blueprint of the African evaluation methodology. Nnoboa, as described by Afriyie (2015) is an "indigenous culture of communal sustainable development (Nnoboa) system" (p. 56). It is rooted in cooperative farming and fundraising (White & Dzor, 2019) among the Akan people in Ghana. It remains a traditional system built on trust, cooperation, and reciprocity (Agyekum, 2006; Appiah-Mensah, 2021; White & Dzor, 2019) which is used to promote development. It is listed in the Ghanaian community system of economics as, "*susu, koro ye kuo, Abu sa, doo ma yen nkye, nsaa*—to take care of the expense of the dead, and the main one which is involved in using collective labor, create a synergy for individuals or group" (Afriyie, 2015, p. 56).

Appiah-Mensah (2021) identifies three major principles of Nnoboa that have kept it as a practice beyond the traditional farming communities to include the nonformal economic sectors. These principles accentuate the significance of adopting it as an evaluation instrument for Ghana, and for Africa. According to the researcher, Nnoboa exudes "communalism (collectivism), Pan-African character, and resilience" (p. 211). By being communalistic, every person who holds stake in a project seeks to support the rest, while the rest seek the welfare of the individual with resources drawn from within their reach. It's a principle that reflects self-help and mutual-aid (Appiah-Mensah, 2021; Borkman, 2006). Nnoboa's Pan-Africanistic tendencies are seen in its reliance on and ascription of dignity to the act of self-sustenance. This aligns with Poe's (2004) definition of African personality, as "the projection of will on the environment" (p. 19). Nnoboa's resilience is seen "in the synergy from the combined effort, collectivism, which is greater than the sum of the individual efforts" (p. 12). Through this system, many communities have benefited from well-accounted-for projects, including the construction of schools, hospitals, toilet facilities, etc. Nnoboa's relevance has been felt in banking, microfinance, agriculture, and even national projects (Afriyie, 2015; Agyeman, 2003; Appiah-Mensah, 2021).

Adinkra, which arguably are the most prominent among all the traditional symbols in Ghana (Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al., 2016), also reveal the deep philosophical convictions of the people in terms of their emotions, beliefs, and values in symbols. Adinkra symbols (see Figure 1) not only underpin the epistemology of Ghanaians, i.e., reflecting the philosophical ideals that offer deep understanding of the values, norms, and beliefs of the Ghanaian people, but they are also used for traditional aesthetic purposes (to decorate traditional artifacts and clothing; Adom, 2016; Agyekum, 2006).

Figure 1. Samples of Recorded Adinkra Symbols
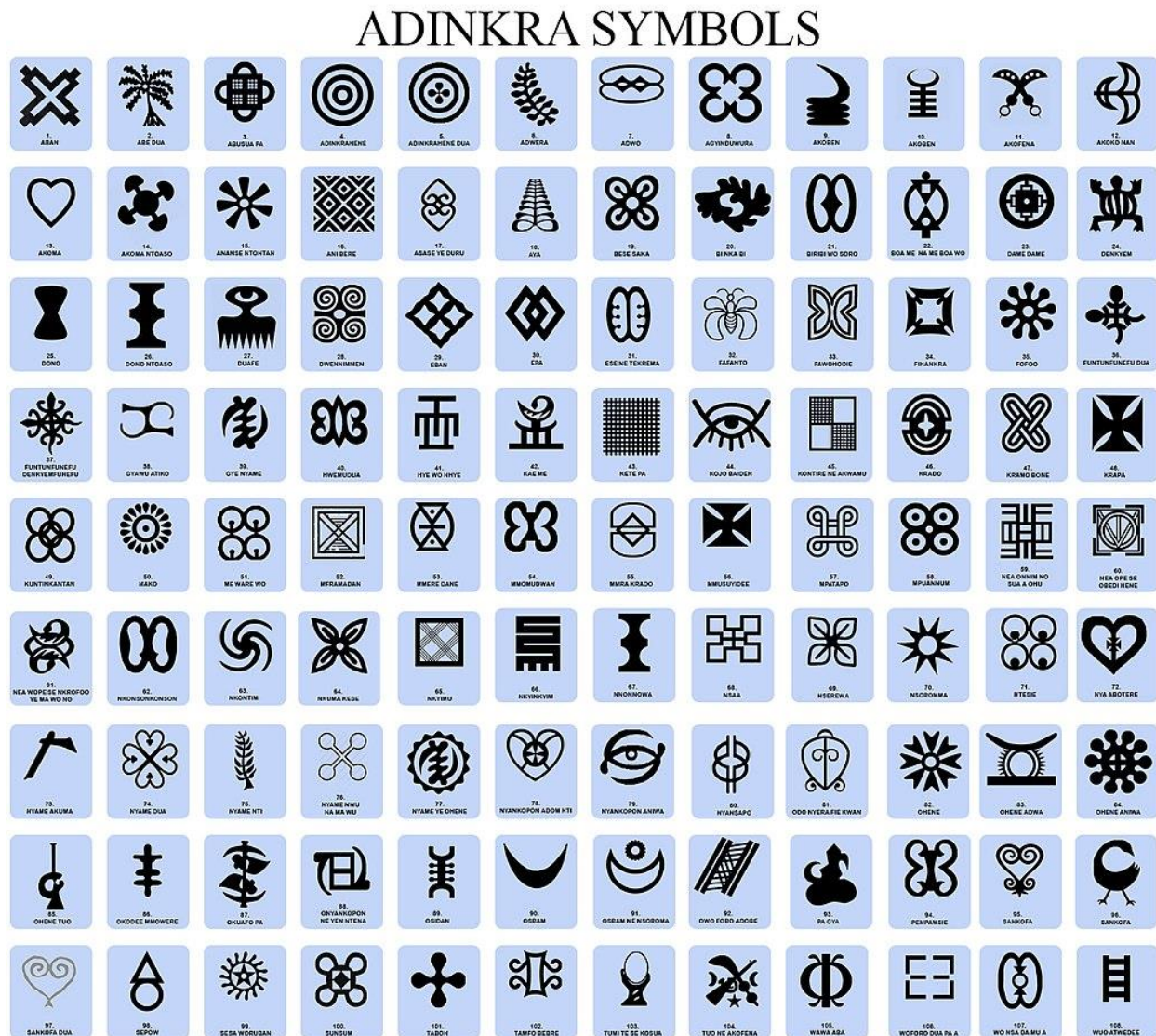
Note. From *Adinkra symbols* [Graphic], by Bosomba Amosah, n.d. CC BY-SA 4.0.

The Adinkra symbolism emanates from the Asante people of Ghana, who are believed to have named the symbols after a king they captured in a war, whose craftsmen were believed to have designed and used the symbols for aesthetics in the king's traditional cloths (Agbo, 2011). It is also believed that some of the symbols were generated from the Akans' trade relations with Islamic merchants (Agbo, 2011), which gives an indication of the morality and divine affection that Ghanaians attach to Adinkra symbols in their use of them. These symbols, which include Sankofa as well as *Gye Nyame, Hwehwe Mu Dua,* etc. are regarded as nonverbal channels, similar to proverbs, idioms, etc., that are embedded with sayings that reflect diverse facets of the lifestyle: beliefs, values, aspirations, and instructions of the traditional Akan society in Ghana (Agyekum, 2006; Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al., 2016).

As seen in the bottom right corner of Figure 1, the concept of Sankofa is visualized through the image of a bird walking forward with its head turned backward upon its tail; elsewhere, it is also depicted as an adorned heart. The related proverb, "Se wo were in a wo Sankofa a yenkyi," is typically translated as "It is not a taboo to return and fetch it

when you forget" (Temple, 2009, p. 1). With its nonlinear representation of time and its salience for sociopolitical liberation frameworks (especially in the African diaspora), Sankofa has been framed as an "Afrocentric methodological practice of historical recovery" (Karenga, 2001, p. 14), which thus has an important foundational place among African epistemological concepts.

Nnoboa vs. Ubuntu

While Africans inhabiting southern states in Africa draw on the generous attributes of Ubuntu to delineate their concept of communalism, the Ghanaian community would employ Nnoboa to accentuate the need for cooperation and collaboration in their communal industrial and economic development. Leveraging Chilisa and Malunga's (2012) ideal community development evaluation framework, Nnoboa compares to Ubuntu (with the support of messages embedded in Adinkra symbols) as follows:

- Sharing and collective ownership of opportunities, responsibilities, and challenges— *Funtumfunafu Denkyemfunafu*
- The importance of people and relationships over things—*Nkonsonkonson*
- Participatory decision making and leadership—*Boa Me Na Me Mmoa Wo* (cooperation and participation)
- Loyalty—*Akoben*, *Hwehwe mu dua* (measuring standards; loyalty, alertness, and readiness to defend)
- Reconciliation as the goal for conflict management and resolution—Sankofa (revision, reconciliation, picking up from where one left off)

Comparing the two conceptual frameworks, it is evident that the applicability of Ubuntu can possibly be replicated in Ghana. Despite the probable diversities in location, ethnicity, peculiar values, and beliefs in the contexts for both concepts for evaluation, Nnoboa and Ubuntu demonstrate close similarities in Chilisa and Malunga's (2012) ideal community development evaluation framework. Nnoboa apparently typifies the relational axiology, epistemology, and ontology of Africa just like Ubuntu does. In terms of axiology, which relates to ethics, and thus to value and worth, Ghanaians demonstrate mutual respect in the reciprocity of Nnoboa like Ubuntu does. In terms of ontology, both Ubuntu and Nnoboa recognize the reliance of each person on the other, which marks a rich sense of community and cooperation. Ubuntu

and Nnoboa both share their epistemologies. Ghanaians, like people in many other African countries, build their knowledge from beliefs and concepts like proverbs, folktales, and myths.

Making a Case for Nnoboa

Ghana, since 1966, has had a string of unsuccessful economic programs with international institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank; the dictates of the acclaimed programs have failed to match and meet the domestic implementation and evaluation needs of the country. In an account of the implications of the loans given out by the IMF to Ghana and how their conditionalities have impacted the poor and vulnerable in the country, Addo et al. (2010) report that while the programs indicated success in the evaluation of the interventions, poverty, the cost of healthcare, and unemployment have continually increased. The researchers also mention that the mining sector of the country, like that in other African states, has recorded losses owing to the World Bank's advice on mining laws that regulate the monetary agreements between Ghana and its foreign investors. Ghana has benefitted from only about 3% in royalties from these agreements (Addo et al., 2010).

In the 1980s and '90s, Ghana was compelled to solicit for assistance from international agencies (World Bank and International Monetary Fund) with the inception of a military government after a coup d'état. Quite unfortunately, each of these programs, which were primarily poverty alleviation and socioeconomic reforms, failed to meet the set targets for the government, because neither the programs nor the evaluation approaches used were sensitive to the cultural needs, values, beliefs, and norms of the people of Ghana. This makes a case for the need of a more culturally sensitive evaluation methodology that, like Nnoboa, aligns with the culture of the people of Ghana. A case cited to buttress the argument for the Nnoboa evaluation concept is that of Aliu Mohammed Nurudeen (2012), who exposes the flaws in the cosmetic participatory evaluation approaches that failed to meet the needs of the stakeholders in northern Ghana. He mentions the Center for Development of People's (CEDEP's) use of non-Indigenous standards in a program carried out by external agencies. The resulting effect was that the target beneficiaries were not positively impacted by the program (Nurudeen, 2012). The discourse therefore advocates for a participatory methodology, structured on the particular ontology, epistemology, and axiology of Ghana,

which is supported by the Nnoboa concept of evaluation.

For a methodology to address the complexities in the geographical, ethnic, and gender diversities of Africa, a developmental and participatory evaluation like Nnoboa should be recommended (Chilisa, 2015). Another case in point is the implementation of the Economic Recovery Program, a social policy and economic reform that failed on account of its failure to recognize and apply a local participatory approach to its implementation and evaluation (Aryeetey & Goldstein, 2000). The program was more focused on liberalizing the economy to discourage the citizens from any tendencies to rely on the public sector. This was alien to them and ended up tilting the balance in favor of a small section of the citizenry, and the government was reported to have been cajoled by the World Bank (Johnson & Wasty, 1993) to comply with recommendations from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund's evaluation recommendations. The government in this pursuit rather stuck to the dictates of the Washington Consensus, which pushed for withdrawal of government assistance to state-owned enterprises in order to achieve macroeconomic stability and less involvement of local institutions in the process (Aryeetey & Goldstein, 2000). It failed to achieve its purpose by worsening the plight of the citizenry. The proposed culturally responsive approach, i.e., Nnoboa, which thrives on communalism and participation, would involve and stimulate cooperation, interdependence, and trust among all stakeholders for the success of the program.

In terms of how Nnoboa could be applied in practice, it is similar to some other MAE and CRE approaches in that it does not necessarily fundamentally differ from the standard, accepted, dominant set of steps that characterize an evaluation process (e.g., engagement of program stakeholders, program design and planning, evaluation design, data collection, data analysis, application of findings, etc.); rather, it points us toward how to do those steps differently. And, we suggest, it points to a difference that makes a difference—in that the approach is rooted in an African ontology and epistemology instead of a Eurocentric one. Table 1 indicates how these steps might be practiced differently in a Nnoboa evaluation.

Table 1. A Nnoboa Evaluation Framing in Relation to Standard Evaluation Steps

Evaluation process step	Nnoboa evaluation framing
Engagement of program stakeholders	Rather than identifying stakeholders after an evaluation is commissioned, the communal and participatory nature of this framing requires that the most interested and affected individuals and groups themselves originate the evaluation, at times alongside the funder or program administrator.
Evaluation design	Instead of selecting from preexisting designs, many of which originate from the Global North and prioritize "objectivity" and "rigor," the design would emerge socially and collectively based on a locally grounded sense of what matters most, and what would be most useful for learning and program improvement in the specific context.
Data collection	This would tend to favor—but would by no means be limited to—qualitative approaches. Writ large, data collection would be participatory in that the false dichotomy between data collector and data provider would be eroded. Data generation would ideally be a communal and collective process of all people and groups involved in the program and evaluation, with predetermined tools and approaches, but also with an openness to new directions that arise through data collection.
Data analysis	Similar to with data collection, and aligned in part with established approaches to participatory analysis (e.g., data parties, search conferences, etc.), this would entail shared, distributed, relational approaches to analysis and interpretation, a type of radical constructivism. It would prioritize relationality—between data points, people, living and nonliving entities—instead of standard reductionistic analytic approaches (i.e., that tend to use categories and quantification to distance the core meaning of the data from the final analysis). This would require a more holistic type of analysis, representing more of the data in its original form rather than flattening it for purposes of reporting and standard accountability.
Application of findings	Here, cooperation, participation, and reconciliation would be key concepts, as the findings of an evaluation are shared and used to ideally improve programs and practices. Since (as with other more participatory approaches to evaluation) the evaluation is not foreign and distant, the use of findings is potentially seamlessly embedded—when the community members initiate and conduct the evaluation, use and application are no longer afterthoughts requiring special attention, because they are part and parcel of the holistic approach. However, this could prove difficult if there are institutions linked to the program, such as the IMF or World Bank, who do not value the Nnoboa approach, because they might find the process and findings unintelligible.

With the addition of Sankofa, there is a potential to further break from the standard evaluation approach by rejecting the hegemony of linear time and thus interrupting the dominant set of evaluation steps—hypothetically throwing standard cause-and-effect relationships, or the importance of historical happenings on contemporary events, into question. This notion is evoked by Dillon (2016), who wrote:

[I]ncorporating time travel, alternate realities, parallel universes and multiverses, and alternative histories is a hallmark of Native storytelling tradition, while viewing time as pasts, presents, and futures that flow together like currents in a navigable stream is central to Native epistemologies. (p. 345)

This is similar to "counterfactual dialogue" as a form of philosophizing, and to the notion of "spiral time," described by Kyle Whyte, a professor at the University of Michigan and citizen of the Potawatomi Nation. In counterfactual dialogue, "[W]e speculate on how our ancestors and our future generations would interpret today's situations and what recommendations they would

make for us as guidance for our individual and collective actions" (2018, p. 229).

Conclusion

It is clearly evidenced in literature that Africa, in its approach to knowledge acquisition, beliefs and values, stands differently and thus requires an approach to evaluation which fits into its practices and aspirations. The ethnic and traditional differences in Africa might not be conducive for advancing a one-size-fits-all approach to MAE evaluation. That notwithstanding, with the compelling similarities in the epistemological, axiological, ontological, and ethnophilosophical framework of the diverse myriad of cultural communities in Africa, Nnoboa can provide a contextually responsive evaluation alternative for Ghanaians and can likewise be in other cultural contexts, especially similar ones, in Africa. In addition, within this Nnoboa concept, future research aimed at further developing and explicating a Ghanaian evaluation epistemology ought to consider Adinkra symbols and concepts—especially Sankofa, due to its particular way of addressing time and linearity—to continue to strengthen and diversify the philosophical and practical foundations of Indigenous, decolonizing evaluation in Africa. Indeed, these insights have potential applications globally, wherever evaluators seek to disrupt the dominant Eurocentric epistemic framings of evaluative inquiry for social change.

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