The Why and How of the Decolonization Discourse

Bagele Chilisa
University of Botswana

Nicole R. Bowman (Lunaape/Mohican)
President, Bowman Performance Consulting
Associate Scientist, University of Wisconsin–Madison

Introduction

> Colonial knowledge operates by concealing the location from which it originates.
> —Dighe and Matthias

This special issue, *Decolonizing Evaluation: Towards a Fifth Paradigm*, a collaborative initiative between the International Evaluation Academy (IEAc) and *The Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation*, was inspired by the concerns that while evaluation reports largely tell stories of success, on the ground there is minimal change, communities remain impoverished, interventions cause harm to the environment, and evaluation allows that to happen. These concerns have prompted reflections on the way evaluation has been conceptualized and whether the framing of evaluation into paradigms, theories, and branches is inclusive of the cultures, philosophies, and knowledge systems of the majority world. One specific initiative of the IEAc is to create an understanding of how a transformed evaluation agenda can be rooted in decolonized paradigms. Scholars (Carden and Alkin, 2012) have conceptualized evaluation in the image of a tree with three branches depicting methods, values, and use. Mertens and Wilson (2012) added a fourth branch that they named "social justice" and further aligned the branches to the four dominant research paradigms, namely postpositivist, constructive/interpretive, pragmatic, and transformative paradigms. Should we decolonize the paradigms by acknowledging and applying a fifth paradigm to our evaluation practices?

An evolving discourse on Indigenous research and evaluation (Smith, 1999; Kovach, 2010; Walter & Andersen, 2013; Wilson, 2008; Held, 2019; Chilisa, 2019; Romm, 2015) has called for a space for a fifth paradigm. The fifth paradigm brings unique dimensions into the discourse on the philosophical foundations of research and evaluation methodologies. Reluctance by evaluators to engage with the fifth paradigm, however, threatens its growth and application to addressing real-world problems. This reluctance about the application of the fifth paradigm to research and evaluation practice is due partly to misconceptions about the meaning and value of the Indigenous knowledge systems of formerly colonized societies and the application of these knowledge systems to research (Chilisa, in press). Chilisa (2019) added a fifth branch to the tree of evaluation approaches, naming it "context and needs" (see Figure 1). This branch is an attempt to bring together common attributes of Indigenous evaluation under an Indigenous science paradigm and articulate their application to evaluation. An Indigenous science paradigm builds on the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions shared across Indigenous cultures. Figure 2 depicts an Indigenous science paradigm as an umbrella for various Indigenous cultural worldviews and frameworks. These cultural ways of seeing reality share the same social theory, history of colonization, and intent to decolonize. The articles in this volume demonstrate the application

of Indigenous evaluation, informed by Indigenous cultural paradigms and evaluation frameworks, to real-world problems.

In the literature and in this issue, scholars Nakaima and Sridharan on Hawaiian epistemology, DeLancey on ontologies based on place and the environment, and Mokgolodi on relational ontologies demonstrate application of Indigenous paradigms and frameworks that share similar ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions and are informed by the same social theory.

Figure 1. A Five-Branch Tree of Evaluation Approaches
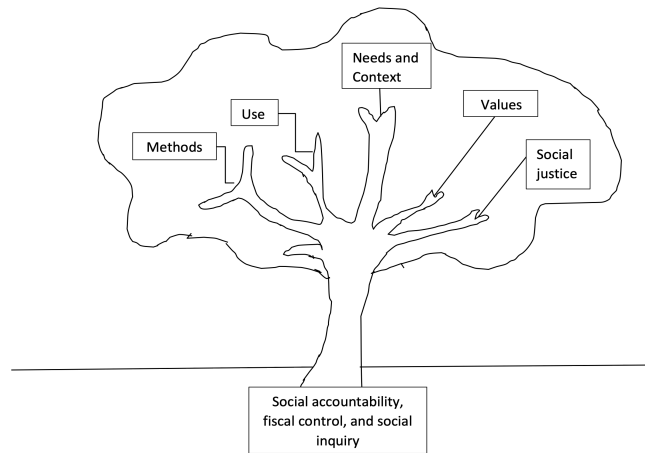
Note. From *Indigenous Research Methodologies* (p. 118), by B. Chilisa, 2019, Sage.

Figure 2. Conceptual Model for an Indigenous Science Paradigm

Note. From "The Power and Politics of Knowledge Production in Program Evaluation: Funder, Methodological, and Pedagogical Colonialism," by J. Billman and B. Chilisa, in L. A. Wingate, A. Boyce, L. W. Becho, and K. Robertson (Eds.), in press, *Core Concepts in Evaluation: Contemporary Commentary on Classic Writings*.

Others, including Dighe and Matthias in this special issue, are inclined toward an image that depicts evaluation as a forest ecosystem, with trees aligned to the different purposes of evaluation (see Figure 3). Interestingly, the people and the forest are one. Clearly, then, there is need for each evaluator to question the philosophical foundations of their beliefs, where they come from, and the ways these beliefs influence how they go about doing evaluation and how they position themselves in the context of the history and social theory of evaluation.

Figure 3. Evaluation as an Ecosystem

Note. From "Seven Directions of Equitable Valuation: Voices, Kinship, and Visions of Indigenous Kwe (Women) Evaluators," by N. R. Bowman, C. Dodge Francis, A. Guerrero-Guarjardo, E. Taylor-Schiro, E., and S. King, in C. Adeodyin, C. Jones, and N. Onukagha (Eds.), 2023, *Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation: Visions and Voices of Emerging Scholars* (pp. 32–43). Cognella Academic Publishing.

Still, the question remains: What does it mean to decolonize paradigms, evaluation theory, and practice, and how do we decolonize, and whose responsibility is it? Corsetti (2022) argues that it is time for a stronger conversation on decolonizing evaluation in Europe. Corsetti further argues that European evaluation societies should openly discuss access to relevant information and localized Indigenous perspectives that can boost and revitalize the values, beliefs, and worldviews of development program beneficiaries so they will be more likely to create lasting and meaningful change. There is definitely a call for unity and dialogue across the globe on decolonization, thus all the more reason for reaching out to diverse international scholars to dialogue on what it means in theory and practice to decolonize evaluation paradigms, theory, and practice. Scholars from Western, non-Western, Indigenous, and other social groups were invited to contribute to this issue—those whose cultures, worldviews, and knowledge systems have been universalized as well as those whose cultures, worldviews, and knowledge systems suffer marginalization and exclusion from the evaluation discourse, theory, and practice.

Philosophical Foundations

If we expand the evaluation theory tree to include a fifth branch informed by the Indigenous paradigm, we will have additional light on that path that would otherwise be obscured in darkness.
—Mertens

In the first part of the issue, scholars are rethinking the philosophical foundations of evaluation, the need to decolonize, what to decolonize, how, and the risks of not decolonizing. The first article, "The Pursuit of Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice Through Evaluation," by Donna M. Mertens, makes the argument that a fifth branch on the evaluation theory tree—on context and needs—aligns with Indigenous paradigms and serves to stimulate questions about theory and practice that inherently address issues of justice and the importance of recognizing the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things. She concludes that the evaluation community was late to the game in recognizing the importance of Indigenous philosophies and theories, and that evaluation design needs to recognize the history of colonization and land stealing, the sovereignty of Indigenous

governments, a spiritual reality, and relational existence.

Several of the papers give mention to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and sovereignty. UNDRIP is the legal and political framework for First Nations governments and Indigenous peoples (First Nations, Inuit, Métis, Hawaii Pacific, Aboriginal, Māori), alongside the tribal constitutions that exist globally, of which there are at least 1,200 in North America alone. These mentions are there to remind the reader about the different distinctions beyond culture, language, and traditional knowledge that Indigenous peoples and First Nations governments hold. However, most of these mentions are brief and mildly descriptive, neglecting to get to the structural, legal, political, and human rights that are unique to sovereigns (individually) and Tribal nation states (First Nations governments) and that exist and interact within the field of evaluation and elsewhere. These are quite important, continue to be erased or ignored by the field, and may suggest an emergence of a legal/political paradigm in evaluation for the future.

In DeLancey's article, "Decolonizing Evaluation of Indigenous Land-Based Programs," she positions power, privilege, and land-based initiatives that were being evaluated and funded using a cultural, community, and legal lens with regard to the legislative, programmatic, policy, and governance components. This article provides praxis (40 years as a non-Indigenous ally), ministry documents and decisions (Northwest Territories), and the literature to challenge us to use a more complex and responsive approach to on-the-land evaluations and those who fund these evaluations. The disconnected reality of evaluators and funders neglects the land treaty and contemporary constitutional rights of First Nations governments, as well as the human and land rights outlined in UNDRIP. This disconnected reality is rooted in the settler state that the fields of philanthropy and evaluation continue to uphold: Their colonial ancestors and now contemporaries fail to see how they still are the benefactors of the assimilationist land, social, economic, health, and educational policies that were used to "get rid of the Indian problem" in Canada or "kill the Indian and save the man" in the United States. O'Connor, Parman, Bowman, and Evergreen, in "Decolonizing Data Visualization" (discussed further in the next section), also trace this genocidal and assimilationist history in the Global North and Global South: The authors discuss precontact, early contact, and contemporary practices in the field that continue to ignore and suppress the contributions of Indigenous scholars, communities, and First Nations. They show that colonization, capitalism, and the settler state are alive and well in evaluation even through concepts and methods of visualization. This includes the governance of data, attention to which recently has become a global movement.

The Indigenous data sovereignty network and the global efforts in data science, legal, and governance disciplines further support the need for a future legal/political paradigm in evaluation. UNDRIP and partner organizations like the First Nations Information Governance Centre, National Congress of American Indians, and voluntary organizations for professional evaluation (Canadian Evaluation Society and Mā Te Rae) have all been very active for decades in these nation- and community-building efforts as part of their broader advocacy and capacity-building initiatives. There is also a very large Indigenous, Global North and South movement for a decolonizing data agenda; *Indigenous Data Sovereignty: Toward an Agenda* was published in 2016 as a global effort: https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.1 2657/31875. It is time for the field of evaluation to become part of this movement, both institutionally and individually. Ignoring the sovereign rights of First Nations and extracting traditional knowledge and cultural/linguistic practices is harmful and represents colonization at the roots. As evaluation practitioners, policy makers, and funders, we must require that these harms are prohibited by and through the field of evaluation, writ large.

Still echoing the value of paradigms in informing evaluation practice, Parsons and Winters describe the ontological, axiological, and epistemological assumptions of a social-ecological systems paradigm and the systems theory that supports it and its methodology. They argue that this paradigmatic approach enables the transformation of evaluation from a focus on individual projects, programs and policies, and initiatives, to a focus on the social-ecological systems in which they exist. The paradigm provides a framework to address funder colonialism (Billman & Chilisa, in press) and what Picciotto refers to in this special issue as "evaluation capture" by Western vested interests. The values of an ecology-based system paradigm, Parsons and Winters write, "include collaboration, cooperation, compassion, caring, integrity, and nurturing." The Indigenous relational ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies also emphasize the same values and in addition emphasize connectedness of the living and the non-living as a way of recognizing the sacredness of the environment and the people who live in it. This Indigenous "connectedness" concept

explains an Indigenous approach to systems thinking where the evaluation practice engages with the evaluation ecosystem that includes, for example, funders as stakeholders, funding policies, knowledge systems, and socio-ecological factors.

Billman, in the article "Entering the Ethical Space Between Epistemologies: A Step Toward Decolonizing the Heart and Mind," continues the discourse on paradigms and argues that Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and practioners need to embrace paradigms that value spirituality. They can do so if they step into the ethical space to interrogate the philosophical foundations of Western thought going back to Aristotle and Descartes. She argues that the founders of Western thought, namely Aristotle and Descartes, reveal a common understanding between ancient Western thought and Indigenous knowledge systems. They grounded all knowledge in an immaterial reality and recognized the interaction between material and immaterial reality. Thus, they embraced epistemologies and ontologies that are not as narrow as Western thought as we know it today but are closer to Indigenous knowledge systems. Western thought privileges empirical knowledge, tentatively accepts traditional knowledge, and rejects revealed knowledge while Indigenous knowledge systems embrace the trinity of knowledge, which is clearly a recognition of the interaction between the material and the immaterial realities as expressed in ancient Western thought.

The next two articles in this section interrogate with illustrations the question of what to decolonize and how to decolonize. O'Connor et al., in their article, "Decolonizing Data Visualization," make an urgent call to "decolonize the way we theorize, operationalize, and produce meaning through text and visualization when conducting evaluation or research studies." They make the argument that data visualization has been dominated by Western thought. Using the Medicine Wheel as a theoretical framework, they show how Western notions of data visualization best practice are woven into Indigenous ways of learning and storytelling. In the article "The Commitment Mural: Let's Decolonize Evaluation Together," Veda and Chilisa call for the liberation of evaluation from normalized publication structures through the use of a mural. They challenge publication structures, more specifically journals, to open space for diversity of expression so that journals become a space for knowledge production, not just dissemination. In the illustrated mural, funders commit to reimagining evaluation commissioning, terms of reference, and evaluation design, and to redressing

power structures in their organizations to question racism and address equity issues in evaluation.

Evaluation Capture

> Western science is just one of many localized and contextualized sciences.
> —Held

The second part of the issue speaks to the logic of evaluation capture and the process through which dominant evaluation narratives and paradigms entrench themselves, becoming the universal truth that drives evaluation theory and practice. The articles in this section address the risks involved in evaluation capture and what can be done to decolonize evaluation. Held, in her article, "Decolonizing Science: Undoing the Colonial and Racist Hegemony of Western Science," argues that Western science colonizes the world by referring to alternative science knowledge as "Indigenous knowledge systems." She argues that Indigenous scholars perpetuate the hierarchy by consistently referring to their Indigenous science as Indigenous knowledge systems. She advances the argument that "science is a collection of principles and practices, varying among branches of science as well as individuals, social groups, and cultures" and that "Western science is just one of the many localized and contextualized sciences." She envisions a new multiparadigmatic space where Indigenous and Western scholars collaborate and cocreate to build new understandings and find solutions to the complex challenges the world faces. In their article, "Framing Anticolonialism in Evaluation: Bridging Decolonizing Methodologies and Culturally Responsive Evaluation," Jordan and Hall maintain that dominant evaluation narratives and paradigms entrench themselves through a process of academic imperialism, epistemological violence, and epistemicide—that is, the murder of knowledge. They propose the anticolonial culturally responsive framework as a tentative approach committed to "pluriversality, justice, self-determination, and the possibility of collaboration between knowledge systems and knowers."

Dighe and Matthias describe how Western thought has become entrenched in evaluation methodologies, theory, and practice through four main apparatuses, namely historical Eurocentrism, analytical bifurcation, historicism, and false universalism. They suggest the following as strategies for decolonizing evaluation: geolocating knowledge, highlighting inadequacies and inconsistencies in Eurocentric knowledge paradigms, and building evaluation models and

theories that reflect Global South experiences. Picciotto, in the article "Evaluation Transformation Implies Its Decolonization," argues that evaluation has become a market good and, through fee dependence, subservient to vested interests. Evaluation transformation requires a new policy agenda inspired by Indigenous evaluation. He argues that transformation of evaluation should begin with the decolonization of evaluation theory and practice. The article outlines an evaluation decolonization agenda. Complementing Picciotto's argument on evaluation capture, Hassnain, in the article "Decolonizing Evaluation: Truth, Power, and the Global Evaluation Knowledge Base," demonstrates how evaluation commissioners dictate the methodologies in evaluation practice and how evaluators steeped in academic imperialism perpetuate colonial evaluation practice by endorsing evaluation commissioners' methodologies. He proposes strategies for decolonization that include decolonizing evaluators, conducting research, and developing country and regional evaluation models informed by contexts, philosophies, histories and cultures, and practices of program recipients.

Evolution and Risks

> A critical place inquiry perspective … would privilege Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies of land…. In this context, the land is no longer simply the location for hosting an activity that leads to an outcome. Instead, being on the land, and part of the land, is itself a valued ultimate outcome.
> —DeLancey

The third part looks at the evolving field of evaluation, the direction this evolution is taking evaluation practice, and the risks and benefits to the discipline. Topics covered include the rise of Indigenous evaluation and Indigenous philosophies and frameworks. Often Indigenous evaluators feel the tensions of academia as they work to unsettle the academy and reclaim their voice, place, and space as traditional knowledge holders and the original caretakers of these lands and contexts of practice. Figure 4 represents these tensions and the healing and transformative kinship Indigenous peoples bring to evaluation (Bowman et al., 2023).

Figure 4. Indigenous Tensions in the Academy

Note. Copyright 2023 by Dr. Nicole R. Bowman (Lunaape/Mohican).

Complementing Hassnain's call for Indigenous regional and country-specific Indigenous evaluation models, Asante and Archibald, in their article, "Beyond Ubuntu: Nnoboa and Sankofa as Decolonizing and Indigenous Evaluation Epistemic Foundations from Ghana," propose an evaluation framework based on the Ghanaian concepts of Nnoboa and Sankofa. They argue that this framework disrupts and challenges hegemonic Eurocentric notions of the linearity of time to yield a Ghanaian Indigenous knowledge of evaluation that can be adapted for use across Africa and globally. Also advancing the use of Indigenous regional and country-specific Indigenous evaluation models and frameworks, Kane and Archibald, in their article, "Ubuntu and Afrofeminism for Decolonizing Evaluation," propose Sylvia Tamale's decolonizing Afrofeminist lens as a complementary Ubuntu framework that has potential application in Indigenous and decolonizing evaluation in African contexts and beyond. Writing from Canada, DeLancey articulates evaluations that go beyond culturally responsive methodologies to the uptake of evaluations based on ontologies and epistemologies of the First Nations in Canada, arguing that the shift is critical for evaluation of Indigenous land-based programs. She articulates an Indigenous evaluation framework based on the concept of place and the recognition that all aspects of life in Indigenous communities are deeply connected to the natural environment. In the context of this Indigenous framework, under the land-based programs, she writes, "the land is no longer simply the location for hosting an activity that leads to an outcome. Instead, being on the land, and part of the land, is itself a valued ultimate outcome." The article is a powerful illustration of the meaning of "context" under an Indigenous context-and-needs branch. Nakaima and Sridharan, in their article on Hawaiian epistemology, also explore the role of place, context, and interconnectedness in evaluation. They argue that a realist evaluation's focus on context is not sufficient and propose a context informed by Hawaiian epistemology. Under Hawaiian epistemology, historical contexts of both places and individuals are critical. This understanding of context leads to an epistemology of a dynamic, alive world—with connections to spiritual and religious practices informing learning and knowing—that does not separate body from mind. Place and the interconnectedness of the living and the non-living are important attributes of Indigenous ontologies across Indigenous communities in Canada and Australia (Wilson, 2008) and in Africa (Chilisa, 2019). The article

demonstrates how Hawaiian epistemology informed an evaluation of a drop-in center in Toronto run by Margaret's Community and Housing Support Services.

Decolonization in Practice

> Evaluation is a knowledge building process.
> —Quantson Davis

The fourth and last part of the issue demonstrates case studies that apply decolonized evaluation practices. In the article "Between Funding Requirements and Community Priorities: Centro Hispano of Dane County [USA]'s Transformative Approach to Program Evaluation," Ahrens, Cruz, Pasturczak, Bakken, and Moore maintain that funders, evaluation commissioners, and practitioners ignore how the institutional history of evaluation—with its focus on accountability and effectiveness, deficit-based narratives about people of color, and a top-down approach to program development—contributes to the extraction and devaluation of community expertise. They demonstrate the application of Centro Hispano's innovative approach focused on community strengths and values, healing ethno-racial trauma, and critical consciousness building to evaluation of a five-year Community Impact Grant from the Wisconsin Partnership Program. The process in the innovative framework, they argue, is an important effort toward dismantling institutionalized neoliberal-logic ideas and deficit-based narratives about communities of color. They propose what funders need to do for evaluation to be transformational on a personal and structural level. Quantson Davis, in the article "Liberated or Recolonized: Making the Case for Embodied Evaluation in Peacebuilding," proposes embodied monitoring, evaluation, and learning as a practical way to decolonize evaluation of peacebuilding programs in the Global South. She argues that most places of conflict do not have the luxury of linear processes; instead, "their processes and lives are in constant, circular, and multidimensional motion." An embodied evaluation process requires disruption of dominant cultures' ways of learning, capacity building of the so-called experts, giving back to communities, and reinstating the epistemologies and learning styles of Indigenous communities, and seeks the self-determination and development of communities in the Global South. Mokgolodi, in the article "Decolonizing Evaluation of Indigenous Guidance and Counseling Approaches," observes that relational ontologies and relational epistemologies seem to cut across

Indigenous groups in Africa, Australia, Canada, North America, and elsewhere, and assesses the extent to which they are used in evaluating Indigenous counseling programs. Selected articles from Africa, Australia, Canada, and India on evaluations of Indigenous guidance and/or counseling therapies are reviewed using an Indigenous relational framework. She observes that even though the Indigenous therapeutic programs reviewed are characterized by axioms that are all relational, their evaluations seem to be linear, pointing to the grip colonialism still has on evaluation of Indigenous counseling therapies.

Conclusion

This special issue debates the place of Indigenous evaluation in the context of metaphorical evaluation tree branches and paradigms. There is a strong argument that in the context of the metaphorical evaluation tree, Indigenous evaluation paradigms occupy a distinct branch, characterized by (a) belief in the interconnectedness between the living and the non-living and between the people and their environment, (b) belief in relational existence, (c) a distinct meaning of context and its role in evaluation, and (d) an understanding of needs that are inclusive of self-determination, sovereignty, giving back to community what is theirs, and revitalizing Indigenous philosophies, concepts, tools, and practices. While Chilisa (2019) has the context and needs branch as an umbrella for Indigenous paradigms characterized by a relational existence, there has been lack of clarity on how context within Indigenous paradigms differs from context in realist evaluation. Nakaima and Sridharan, in the article "Steps Toward Evaluation as Decluttering: Learnings from Hawaiian Epistemology," explain the difference, while DeLancey, in the article "Decolonizing Evaluation of Indigenous Land-Based Programs," demonstrates the application of context from the perspective of an Indigenous paradigm. There is also a clear meaning of "needs" that goes beyond projects' needs to self-determination, sovereignty, and Land Back. In the article "Evaluation Transformation Implies Its Decolonization," Picciotto makes the argument for adopting Indigenous evaluation paradigms, theory, methodologies, frameworks, and tools as a necessary step to addressing some of the challenges that the world faces today.

Scholars are making accessible Indigenous evaluation frameworks that can be applied to the field. In this issue Nakaima and Sridharan demonstrate the application of a Hawaiian epistemology, DeLancey an evaluation framework based on place and land, O'Connor et al. an application of the Medicine Wheel, Asante and Archibald the use of Nnoboa and Sankofa, Kane and Archibald Sylvia Tamale's decolonizing and Afrofeminist lens, Jordan and Hall an anticolonial culturally responsive framework, Ahrens et al. Centro Hispano's innovative approach, and Quantson Davis embodied monitoring evaluation practice.

A recurring theme in this issue is the perspective that funders and evaluation commissioners entrench practices that undervalue communities' knowledge systems and practices to universalize Western-based evaluation paradigms and their methodologies. Suggestions are made on how to engage with funders and evaluators: See in this issue Parsons and Winters, who draw on systems sciences to liberate evaluation; DeLancey's "Decolonizing Evaluation of Indigenous Land-Based Programs"; Quantson Davis's "Liberated or Recolonized: Making the Case for Embodied Evaluation in Peacebuilding"; and Hassnain's "Decolonizing Evaluation: Truth, Power, and the Global Evaluation Knowledge Base." Almost all articles embrace collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and engagement of funders and commissioners. In Veda and Chilisa's article, "The Commitment Mural: Let's Decolonize Evaluation Together," commissioners commit to the decolonization of the evaluation agenda. Decolonization of minds and the limitations of culturally responsive evaluation are also recurring themes.

Acknowledgment

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