Over the past two decades, Africa has begun a process of development with the objective of creating better living conditions for its people. The inclusive nature of development policies or programs is illustrated by the fact that they take into account stakeholders at all levels - including populations (potential beneficiaries) - in the design, implementation and evaluation.

For the specific case of evaluation, it seems that Africa, despite having its historical literature essentially recorded orally, has much to offer in order to adapt an evaluation theory and practice – currently dominated by the Western worldview to its own context and needs. Far from being anachronistic, the oral history of the continent could provide a solid foundation for promoting an evaluation approach Made in Africa.
Introduction

For many decades, Africa has been an experimental field for a multitude of development policies, plans and programs. However, their implementation in all African countries has so far yielded mixed or, at the least, insignificant results. These results stem from a lack of ownership of strategic frameworks by project populations in addition to their very weak participation in the development of programs and evaluation processes that accompany them. Therefore it is necessary to find and carefully adapt evaluation approaches that are appropriate to the African context and which incorporate genuine participation by the affected populations.

Africa is unique due to its rich oral history, or orality, with more than 3,000 distinct ethnic groups and 1,500 languages spoken in 54 countries. Despite modernism, which is fueled by globalization on a larger scale, the oral conveyance of history still occupies a prominent place in the transmission of values and knowledge in Africa.

This "in forma" basis for a "Made in Africa Evaluation" launched the creation of the African Evaluation Association (Association africaine d’évaluation or, AfrEA) in 1999 and was reiterated at the Bellagio conference in September 2012. This new concept of "Made in Africa Evaluation" aims to combine international evaluation methods with African political, economic, social and cultural realities and values. This being the case, it is not a question of contrasting a typically African view with the international standards of evaluation or even less of “indigenizing” the practice of evaluation, as pointed out by F. Cloete.

It is worth reminding that evaluation is not new in Africa. In many traditions and cultures, the transition from one stage of life to another is furnished with several activities aimed at assessing the potential of possible candidates. Through initiation rites and exoteric activities, members of traditional African communities are tested for recognition or transition to a higher social level.

Using this customary approach to communication within African populations could help to drive better monitoring and evaluation processes. In this respect, the role of orality is not just marginal or additive but can be a “royal path” to producing an evaluation model developed to the unique the specificities of Africa.

This article aims to highlight the theoretical aspects underlying a conceptualization of orality, to address this relationship...
with linguistic diversity and to present another anthropocentric evaluation approach that combines orality and video.

Orality, a difficult but unifying concept

What do we mean by orality?

According to Élisabeth Lhote, orality is first and foremost an enactment of a long psycho-socio-linguistic-physiological process that is accompanied by a sound emission and / or reception using vocal organs and hearing. It is, in essence, the process of conveying thought in a physical or physiological nature, which every individual has learned through a language. When we put thought to action, we assume a preparatory phase during which a certain number of factors are solicited.

Joseph Mamboungou, for his part, indicates that orality can only be understood in terms of the relation that the individual maintains with language, him or herself, others and the whole of the outside world.

Jean Derive, in his article entitled "Typology and functions of some oral genres of Manding in terms of the criterion of spatiality", perfectly illustrates these different relationships in the field of orality. According to him, the Mandingo civilization highlights three types of spaces where oral genres occur: a private space, a public space, and a contingent space - that is, a space that defines a particular type of activity exercised in a place to which the oral genre is intrinsically linked.

The private space

This is defined as that of the "family area" (lù), a space where shelter is provided to an extended family whose core is a home with a head of the family.

It is in this space that women traditionally cook; it is also the place for meetings (especially in the dry season) to entertain, address various subjects and practice oral literature through "stories" (nsíirin or ntàlen), "riddles" (ntàlenkɔɔbɔ), historical accounts, myths and allegories, etc. Friends and neighbors can attend as well.

The public space

For cultural events, including the expression of oral literature, Manding have a public ceremonial space called fërɛ that can be used both at the neighborhood and community level. This usually entails singing sometimes accompanied by dance, the reciting of "epics" (fäṣa) of ceremonial and melodic songs involving not only the family, but the entire community.

The contingent space

Some genres of Mandingo oral literature are intrinsically linked to activities that take place in a specific space; with any works which are the outcome of these activities being executed in the same place. So, for example, "agricultural songs" (sɛnɛ donkili) – often punctuated with stories and riddles - are performed in the fields during key seasons (sowing, weeding, etc ...). Similarly, several types of "songs or stories of hunters" (dônsodɔnkili, dônsomaana) are performed in the bush or in ritualised places, while others can also be performed on the fërɛ.

These examples demonstrate how, for the Mandingo, literary speech is well controlled in space (as in time) and the modes of celebration of oral literature are diversified, yet standardized. Moreover, the places for expression depend on the type of oral literature with different literary genres organized differently.

Using linguistic diversity to develop a participatory approach

The foregoing clearly shows the unifying character of orality in African societies through linguistic diversity.
The linguistic diversity of Africa is a considerable asset that must be taken into account in the design and implementation of development programs. Since languages are essentially the vehicle of cultures, including idiosyncrasies and socio-anthropological singularities, the multiplicity of dialects allows an accumulation of diverse endogenous elements that actors in the evaluation process can exploit for adaptation purposes.

Applauding oral literature, Léopold Sédar Senghor wrote, “It is the chance of Africa to have disdained writing, even when she did not ignore it ... Because writing impoverishes reality, it crystallizes it into rigid categories and fixes it when reality is itself, to be alive, fluid and without contours.”

The fluidity of oral language opens windows of opportunities for increased participation by populations in the evaluation of projects for which they are the beneficiaries.

The concept of participation is applied in many ways and covers different practical fields, but it can also directly involve a community. Participation is intrinsically linked to the exercise of democracy, the freedom of expression, association, and opportunities for a community to communicate through explicit signs. Similarly, participation has a strong correlation with accountability. In all projects, including an evaluation project, the responsibility of the stakeholders comes through their effective participation, it requires the clarification of their roles and duties as well as their contributions to a project.

These contributions can come in many forms. It may involve i) devoting time to the project; ii) providing services; iii) providing equipment or any other input needed for the project; etc.

These contributions, however modest, provide a sense of ownership over evaluation activities. Without this, the project may always be perceived as the initiative of “others”. Indeed, evaluation is inseparable from a certain degree of democracy. The culture of evaluation must therefore be profound enough to have a lasting impact on the beneficiaries of development projects or programs.

Most Significant Change: an anthropocentric evaluation technique

An evaluation technique little known in Africa but already used on other continents can easily apply to this situation. This technique is referred to the Most Significant Change (MSC) and was developed by Rick Davies and Jess Dart.

MSC provides a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation, as it promotes the participation of a large number of stakeholders in a project - all of whom play a key role in the choice of the changes to be made, as well as in the analysis of the data. In addition, this alternative evaluation method seeks to highlight peculiarities and divergences on points of view rather than to simply synthesize the information. It can be used as an alternative to the formulation of indicators, or as a complementary solution.

This method is based on a «soft» system approach. It involves structured interactions between stakeholders. Or, in other words, instead of predefined indicators of progress, it is based on «stories on the ground» to «make sense from practical reality and the effects that follow.»

The MSC method also enables beneficiaries, including the most vulnerable, to be heard and encourages collective learning.

One of the advantages of the MSC evaluation method is that it provides data on impact from which subsequent obtained results can be used to judge the performance of the program as a whole.
Overall, the MSC method is about collecting stories of significant change in the field and then systematically selecting the most significant ones through stakeholder panels or team members. These actors are initially involved through the investigation of project impact. The MSC method has been judged as very useful by many organisations, for many reasons:

1. It is an effective way to identify unexpected changes;

2. Makes for the clear identification of an organization’s values and the determination of the most important ones. In addition, by submitting these values to analysis, it is easy to identify the most significant changes at one level or another in the organization;

3. Provides a participatory form of evaluation that does not require any particular professional competence. Compared with other forms of evaluation, this method can more readily cross cultures;

4. Encourages the analysis and collection of data in a collegial way as participants must justify to their colleagues why they think that a given change is more important than the other;

5. Can help build analytical capacity and conceptualize the expected effects of a project;

6. Can offer a very detailed picture of what is happening, rather than an excessively simplified image in which organizational, social and economic evolutions are reduced to a single figure;

7. Can be used to monitor and evaluate bottom-up initiatives, in the absence of predefined results, without possible gap analysis.

Participatory video and the Most Significant Change

MSC is readily adaptable to media tools, such as video, and can produce wonderfully unexpected effects. Video is a very interesting means of communication due to its versatility and the evocative richness of animated images.

According to Fabio La Rocca, an image must be thought of text, or in other words, as a mechanism capable of

![Figure 1: Story collection process, Learning For Peace Program, UNICEF in the Haut-Sassandra region, Côte d’Ivoire](image-url)
forming meanings whose functioning and effects are describable. It is a means of expression, communication and demonstration, a tool that brings together the three fundamental principles of an analysis: description, research of contexts and interpretation.

The use and objective of video can be very different. For example, it can serve as a “notebook” to describe a situation, report an event, collect a testimony or a statement, and disregard the quality of its audio-visual properties. It can also be used as a more sophisticated and complex information or training tool. The video can be (...) used to exchange testimonies, to report important events or ceremonies, to film musical groups, support storytelling, or theater performances.

Participatory video (PVMSC) can also provide a technique to allow a human group to shape and create their own story. Making a video is easy and accessible, and is an effective way to encourage people to explore issues together, express their concerns, or just be creative in the art of telling stories.

This powerful process can enable a group or community to solve problems of data collection and archiving social, cultural or historical symbols. However, it also helps to communicate a community’s needs and ideas more easily to decision-makers and/or other groups and communities. As such, participatory video can be a very effective tool for mobilizing and engaging marginalized populations and helping them to implement their own forms of sustainable development based on local needs.

Participatory video can also help to provide more precise information on program performance and achieved results as well as the effects and changes emanating from the program. All can be used to help measure program performance more effectively.
MSC is an evaluation approach that, because of its flexibility, adaptability and ease of use, fits well into program evaluation needs within an African context where people are more inclined to use speech as the main communication tool.

**Conclusion**

While explaining several key aspects of orality and community participation in the African context, this article has attempted to show the benefits of an oral communication-based assessment. Clearly, orality, along with other African socio-cultural specificities, can play a major role in the evaluation process and help develop an evaluation model adapted to Africa and hence, better contribute to its development.

By combining the MSC approach with the use of participatory video, evaluation can better take into account the opinions of African populations, especially those in rural areas, and help them to become familiar with an evaluation culture – all in the objective to better judge the effects of development projects and programs on the continent. In addition, the MSC model is a meta-evaluation tool for programs and therefore contributes to improvement of program life cycles.

**Endnotes**

1. “Soft” system thinking postulates that there are multiple perceptions of reality and emphasizes qualitative methods
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