EVALUATIVE LOGICS OF SOCIAL JUDGEMENT IN IKA PROVERBS: AN ETHNOPRAGMATIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract
This study investigates how Ika proverbs organise and justify social judgement, addressing the limited attention given to evaluative reasoning in proverb scholarship. Using a qualitatively analysed corpus of 1,059 culturally verified Ika proverbs, the study integrates ethnopragmatics, cultural script analysis and appraisal theory to examine how proverbial imagery attributes responsibility, legitimises authority and evaluates conduct. Iterative comparison identifies five overlapping evaluative logics: consequence-based, hierarchical, prudential, reciprocity-based and moral accountability. Close readings show how these logics support indirect warnings, criticism, advice and assessments of social relationships. The study argues that Ika proverbs provide culturally situated resources for evaluating behaviour rather than simply transmitting moral prescriptions. Because the evidence consists of documented proverbs and speaker-informed interpretations, claims about their use in naturally occurring interaction remain provisional. The findings contribute a framework for analysing the reasoning underlying indigenous proverbial evaluation.

Keywords: social evaluation; Ika proverbs; ethnopragmatics; cultural scripts; appraisal theory.

1. Introduction

Human social life is inherently evaluative. Individuals and communities continuously assess actions, character, relationships, authority, and life outcomes against socially recognised standards of appropriateness, responsibility, wisdom, and morality. Such evaluations are central to the maintenance of social order because they provide the basis upon which conduct is praised, criticised, justified, condemned, or legitimised. Consequently, evaluation has emerged as a significant area of inquiry across pragmatics, discourse studies, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology, where scholars have increasingly recognised that language does not merely describe social reality but actively participates in its interpretation and assessment (Hunston & Thompson 2000; Martin & White 2005; Haugh 2015).

Research in pragmatics and discourse studies has shown that evaluation is central to social interaction because speakers use language to assess behaviour, negotiate relationships, and position themselves with respect to shared norms (Hunston & Thompson 2000; Martin & White 2005; Kádár & Haugh 2013). However, most research has focused on evaluation in interaction rather than on culturally established discourse forms through which communities preserve and reproduce systems of judgement.

One such discourse form is the proverb. Proverbs constitute a prominent feature of communicative practice in many societies and have long attracted scholarly attention because of their ability to condense collective

experiences into culturally recognisable expressions of wisdom. In African contexts, proverbs have been described as repositories of communal wisdom, instruments of moral instruction, and resources for social regulation (Yankah 1989; Owomoyela 2005; Finnegan 2012). Research has shown that they facilitate persuasion, conflict management, criticism, socialisation, and the transmission of cultural values (Odebunmi 2006 2008). Consequently, scholarship has generated substantial insights into the communicative functions and sociocultural significance of proverbial discourse.

Despite these advances, a notable gap remains. Existing studies have predominantly focused on what proverbs teach, the values they encode, and the social functions they perform. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the evaluative principles through which proverbs organise social judgement. Existing proverb scholarship has demonstrated that proverbs transmit moral values, regulate behaviour, reproduce social ideologies, and perform important pragmatic functions (Yankah 1989; Odebunmi 2006 2008; Lomotey & Chachu 2020; Dzahene-Quarshie & Omari 2021). However, these studies typically treat evaluation as an implicit outcome of proverb use rather than as a primary analytical object. Consequently, the evaluative principles through which proverbs organise social judgement remain comparatively underexplored.

The present study addresses this gap through an examination of Ika proverbs. Ika is a language spoken predominantly in Delta State and parts of Edo State, Nigeria. Like many African speech communities, the Ika community possesses a rich proverbial tradition through which social experiences, cultural expectations, and normative judgements are communicated. Specifically, this study investigates what evaluative logics structure social judgement in Ika proverbs, how these logics organise assessments of character, conduct, authority, social relations, and life outcomes, and what these evaluative patterns reveal about indigenous frameworks of social judgement within the Ika speech community.

Drawing on an ethnographically documented corpus of Ika proverbs, the study argues that proverbial discourse constitutes an indigenous system of social evaluation organised around recurring evaluative logics. The analysis identifies five interrelated evaluative logics, namely consequence-based evaluation, hierarchical evaluation, prudential evaluation, reciprocity-based evaluation, and moral accountability. Together, these logics provide culturally shared principles through which social reality is interpreted, relationships are negotiated, and social conduct is judged.

2. Social evaluation and proverbial discourse

2.1 Social evaluation, morality, and social judgement

Human social life is fundamentally evaluative. Individuals and communities continually assess actions, relationships, identities, authority, and life outcomes against socially recognised standards of appropriateness, responsibility, competence, and morality. Through such assessments, communities establish expectations for behaviour, allocate praise and blame, negotiate social relationships, and maintain social order. Evaluation is therefore not simply a matter of expressing personal opinion. Rather, it constitutes a central mechanism through which social reality is interpreted, organised, and regulated.

The importance of evaluation has attracted considerable attention within pragmatics, discourse studies, and sociolinguistics. Scholars increasingly recognise that language does not merely represent reality but also provides resources through which speakers assess and interpret it. Hunston and Thompson (2000) argue that evaluation is an essential dimension of discourse because speakers simultaneously communicate information and position themselves towards what is being discussed. Similarly, Martin and White's (2005) appraisal framework demonstrates that evaluative meanings are systematically encoded through linguistic resources that express attitudes, judgements, and assessments of people, actions, and events. Evaluation thus operates as a key mechanism through which speakers communicate socially significant meanings and align themselves with particular value positions.

Evaluation is inherently relational because it positions speakers with respect to socially recognised norms and expectations. Research on stance-taking shows that speakers evaluate objects, position themselves, and align with others simultaneously (Du Bois 2007; Jaffe 2009). Evaluative judgements are also closely connected to morality, accountability, face, and rapport management because they influence social standing and interpersonal relations (Spencer-Oatey 2008; Kádár & Haugh 2013; Haugh 2015 and Haugh et al. 2021).

Despite extensive scholarship on evaluation, much existing research has focused primarily on evaluative acts occurring within particular interactions. Considerably less attention has been devoted to the culturally established communicative resources through which communities preserve and reproduce systems of social judgement across time. Evaluations do not arise solely from individual encounters. They are also shaped by inherited forms of discourse that provide recognised standards for assessing behaviour, authority, responsibility, and social outcomes. Understanding social evaluation therefore requires attention not only to interactional processes but also to the communicative traditions through which evaluative norms are institutionalised and transmitted. This is particularly evident in proverbial discourse, where culturally shared judgements become

institutionalised through traditional forms of expression. Lomotey and Chachu (2020) demonstrate that African proverbs encode and reproduce socially recognised gender ideologies and power relations, illustrating how inherited discourse traditions serve as vehicles for the transmission of evaluative norms. One such tradition is proverbial discourse, which provides culturally authorised frameworks for interpreting and judging social reality.

2.1.2 Proverbs as evaluative discourse

Proverbs constitute one of the most enduring and culturally significant forms of discourse through which communities preserve, communicate, and reproduce social knowledge. Across societies, they function as condensed expressions of collective experience, cultural wisdom, and normative expectations. Their authority derives not only from their linguistic form but also from their status as socially recognised repositories of communal knowledge. As Mieder (2004) observes, proverbs represent traditional statements that encapsulate shared understandings of human behaviour and social life, while Finnegan (2012) highlights their importance as integral components of African oral traditions. Similarly, Yankah (1989) argues that proverbs occupy a privileged position within African rhetorical practices because they enable speakers to invoke culturally sanctioned forms of reasoning and authority during communication.

Traditional proverb scholarship has largely emphasised the didactic and moral functions of proverbs. Within this perspective, proverbs are viewed as vehicles through which communities transmit values, social norms, and practical wisdom across generations. They provide guidance concerning appropriate conduct, interpersonal relationships, leadership, responsibility, and social obligations. Through repeated use, proverbs contribute to the preservation of collective memory and cultural continuity, enabling communities to maintain shared understandings of desirable and undesirable forms of behaviour. Consequently, proverbs have often been treated as repositories of cultural knowledge that encode the moral foundations of social life.

More recent scholarship has shifted attention from the content of proverbs to their communicative and pragmatic functions. Rather than viewing proverbs as static texts, researchers increasingly conceptualise them as contextually deployed resources whose meanings emerge through interaction. Norrick (1985) argues that proverbial meaning cannot be separated from the communicative situations in which proverbs are employed, while Odebunmi (2006 2008) demonstrates that proverbs perform a wide range of pragmatic functions, including persuasion, criticism, justification, warning, conflict management, and social negotiation. From this perspective, proverbs are not merely statements about social reality but communicative tools through which speakers actively shape interpretations of events, actions, and relationships. Similarly, Dzahene-Quarshie and Omari (2021) show that Akan and Swahili proverbs reproduce culturally shared understandings of gender, identity, and social roles, illustrating how proverbial discourse participates in the construction of social meaning and the reinforcement of communal ideologies. Likewise, Lomotey and Chachu (2020) demonstrate that proverbs function as sites where gender ideologies and power relations are constructed, negotiated, and legitimised across cultures. More broadly, Lomotey and Csajbok-Twerefou (2021) argue that contemporary proverb scholarship increasingly views proverbs as pragmatic and sociolinguistic resources through which speakers negotiate meaning, construct identities, and reproduce culturally shared understandings across communicative contexts. Their findings suggest that proverbs do not merely reflect social realities but actively participate in the reproduction of normative social hierarchies and culturally sanctioned forms of evaluation.

African proverb studies have shown that proverbs contribute to the transmission of cultural values, the regulation of social behaviour, the construction of identities, the negotiation of social meaning, and the reproduction of communal norms (Yankah 1989; Odebunmi 2008; Bobuafor 2021; Dzahene-Quarshie & Omari 2021; Finnegan 2012). For example, Bobuafor (2021) demonstrates that proverbial discourse among Tafi and Ewe speakers serves as a vehicle for cultural socialisation, moral instruction, and the transmission of shared community values, highlighting the role of proverbs in shaping social expectations and behaviour. These studies demonstrate that proverbs function as important sociocultural resources through which communities regulate behaviour and reproduce cultural norms.

Nevertheless, a notable limitation remains within existing scholarship. Although evaluation is often implicit in discussions of proverb functions, values, and ideologies, the evaluative principles through which proverbs organise social judgement have received comparatively limited scholarly attention. Studies such as Lomotey and Chachu (2020) demonstrate how proverbs reproduce ideological and power structures, while other research has examined their communicative, moral, and sociocultural functions (Yankah 1989; Odebunmi 2006 2008; Bobuafor 2021). However, less attention has been paid to the underlying evaluative logics through which communities assess conduct, authority, responsibility, and social relationships. This tendency obscures the fact that proverbs often operate as culturally authorised judgements through which communities assess conduct, allocate responsibility, interpret consequences, and establish standards of social worth.

2.1.3 Indigenous knowledge and cultural models

Understanding the evaluative significance of proverbs requires attention to the broader systems of knowledge within which they operate. Indigenous knowledge systems comprise the accumulated understandings, values, beliefs, and interpretive frameworks through which communities make sense of social experience. These systems provide culturally recognised ways of understanding human behaviour, social relationships, authority, responsibility, and the consequences of actions. They are not merely descriptive bodies of knowledge. Rather, they are deeply normative because they establish standards through which individuals and communities evaluate what is considered appropriate, desirable, wise, or morally acceptable.

A particularly influential approach to understanding these frameworks is provided by the concept of cultural models. According to Holland and Quinn (1987), cultural models are socially shared cognitive structures that enable members of a community to interpret experiences in broadly similar ways. These models organise knowledge about persons, relationships, events, and social institutions, providing commonly recognised assumptions about how the world works and how people ought to behave within it. Cultural models thus serve as important foundations for social judgement because they establish the interpretive criteria through which actions and outcomes become meaningful.

Cultural linguistics similarly argues that communities develop shared cultural conceptualisations that shape how reality is interpreted and evaluated (Sharifian 2017). These conceptualisations provide culturally recognised reference points through which conduct, decisions, and relationships become meaningful and subject to judgement.

Ethnopragmatic scholarship provides a particularly useful framework for examining how such culturally embedded meanings operate. Ethnopragmatics emphasises the importance of analysing communicative practices from the perspective of the cultural communities in which they are used. Goddard and Wierzbicka (2004) argue that communities possess culturally specific norms, assumptions, and expectations that guide interpretation and interaction. These understandings may be represented through cultural scripts, which capture locally meaningful ways of thinking about social behaviour and interpersonal relationships. Wierzbicka (2003) similarly demonstrates that communicative practices often reflect culturally distinctive ways of conceptualising social life that cannot be fully understood through universalist assumptions alone.

Viewed through these perspectives, and following Agha's (2007) argument that linguistic forms become socially meaningful through their association with culturally recognised values and expectations, proverbs may be understood as condensed expressions of indigenous knowledge and cultural models. They do not merely communicate cultural values. Rather, they preserve culturally shared ways of interpreting actions, assigning responsibility, evaluating relationships, and understanding the consequences of behaviour. Through their repeated use, proverbs contribute to the transmission of collective understandings that guide social judgement across generations.

They therefore function as important repositories of culturally grounded evaluative knowledge. Evidence for this role can be found in studies showing how proverbs preserve culturally shared understandings of social hierarchy, gender relations, and normative conduct. For example, Lomotey and Chachu (2020) demonstrate that proverb use reflects and reproduces culturally sanctioned power relations, suggesting that proverbs function as repositories of indigenous social knowledge as well as mechanisms for its transmission. This view is consistent with Lomotey and Csajbok-Twerefou's (2021) observation that proverbs serve as important sociolinguistic resources through which cultural knowledge, social identities, and communal values are preserved and communicated across generations.

2.2 Theoretical and analytical framework

2.2.1 Ethnopragmatics, appraisal, and social norms

The study adopts an ethnopragmatic orientation because Ika proverbs are treated as culturally situated forms of meaning rather than isolated linguistic expressions (Goddard 2006; Wierzbicka 2003). This perspective is useful for identifying the cultural assumptions through which proverbs become intelligible as judgements about conduct, responsibility, authority, and social relations. Cultural scripts are relevant because they help reconstruct locally recognised expectations concerning how people should behave, speak, and evaluate one another.

Appraisal theory provides a complementary tool for identifying evaluative meanings within the proverb corpus (Martin & White 2005). Its category of judgement is particularly relevant because many proverbs assess human behaviour, competence, propriety, diligence, wisdom, and accountability. However, the study does not use appraisal theory merely to classify evaluative vocabulary. Rather, it uses appraisal as a way of identifying implicit judgements realised through metaphor, analogy, contrast, and narrative imagery.

The analysis also draws on stance, face, and social norm approaches to explain how proverb-based evaluations function socially. Proverbs allow speakers to position themselves in relation to communal values while presenting criticism, warning, or advice as culturally authorised rather than purely personal (Du Bois 2007;

Jaffe 2009). Because many proverbs evaluate behaviour indirectly, they also help manage face concerns, relational work, and the interpersonal risks associated with criticism (Locher & Watts 2005; Spencer-Oatey 2008; Kádár & Haugh 2013). Together, these perspectives explain how Ika proverbs encode evaluation, invoke communal authority, and regulate social conduct.

3.2 Evaluative logics

This study adopts evaluative logics as its central analytical construct. Evaluative logics are recurring, culturally shared principles through which social judgements are organised and justified in discourse. Rather than focusing on what a proverb is about, the concept directs attention to how a proverb arrives at a particular judgement and the reasoning that underpins that judgement.

The concept builds on the assumption that social evaluation is shaped by culturally recognised understandings of responsibility, authority, reciprocity, prudence, and morality. Proverbs are particularly useful for examining these processes because they condense communal knowledge into memorable and authoritative forms. When speakers invoke proverbs, they draw upon socially recognised standards for interpreting actions, relationships, and outcomes.

The analytical focus of the study is therefore not on thematic classification but on recurring patterns of evaluative reasoning. Through qualitative analysis of the corpus, attention is directed towards how behaviour is assessed, responsibility is assigned, authority is legitimised, relationships are interpreted, and consequences are understood. Proverbs addressing different topics may nevertheless rely on similar evaluative principles.

The analysis identifies five recurring evaluative logics that organise social judgement in Ika proverbial discourse. Consequence-based evaluation assesses behaviour through its outcomes. Hierarchical evaluation draws on authority, experience, and legitimacy. Prudential evaluation concerns foresight, preparedness, and practical wisdom. Reciprocity-based evaluation focuses on mutual obligations and relational balance. Moral accountability evaluates conduct in terms of responsibility, diligence, and integrity.

These categories are analytical rather than rigid. Individual proverbs may reflect multiple evaluative logics simultaneously. Nevertheless, they provide a systematic framework for identifying how social judgement is organised within Ika proverbial discourse.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative ethnopragmatic approach to examine social evaluation in Ika proverbs. The dataset comprises 1,059 culturally recognised proverbs collected through ethnographic documentation and consultation with competent native speakers. Proverbs functioning primarily as greetings, formulaic expressions, names, or non-proverbial sayings were excluded. Where variants existed, the most widely recognised version was retained.

Because proverbs often contain culturally specific meanings that are not directly transferable across languages, particular attention was paid to translation and interpretation. Each proverb was first recorded in its original Ika form and subsequently translated into English. Literal translations were retained where necessary to preserve culturally significant imagery, metaphors, and evaluative meanings.

Interpretations were informed through discussions with competent native speakers to ensure that culturally embedded meanings were accurately represented. This process was particularly important because many proverbs communicate evaluations indirectly through metaphorical and symbolic language. Consultation with speakers therefore helped identify the social assumptions and evaluative implications associated with each proverb.

The analysis followed an inductive qualitative procedure informed by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2022) and guided by the theoretical framework developed in the preceding section. The objective was not to classify proverbs according to subject matter alone but to identify recurring principles through which social judgements were organised.

The analytical process involved four stages. First, the proverb corpus was read repeatedly to develop familiarity with its evaluative content. Second, individual proverbs were examined for expressions of judgement relating to behaviour, responsibility, authority, relationships, and social outcomes. Third, proverbs exhibiting similar evaluative reasoning were grouped together and compared. Finally, broader patterns of judgement were identified and refined into recurring evaluative logics.

Throughout the analysis, attention was directed towards the reasoning processes underlying evaluations rather than merely their thematic content. Proverbs addressing different topics were therefore analysed together when they reflected similar principles of judgement. This approach enabled the identification of culturally shared evaluative patterns that transcend individual proverb themes. Through iterative comparison, five recurrent evaluative logics emerged from the corpus: consequence-based evaluation, hierarchical evaluation, prudential evaluation, reciprocity-based evaluation, and moral accountability. All 1,059 proverbs were examined during the

coding process, although only representative examples are presented and discussed in detail in the findings section.

Credibility was enhanced through consultation with competent native speakers, repeated examination of the corpus, and iterative category development. The identified evaluative logics are presented as recurring patterns of social reasoning rather than definitive interpretations of individual proverbs.

5. Findings

5.1 Corpus presentation and analytical overview

The analysis draws on a corpus of 1,059 culturally verified Ika proverbs collected through ethnographic documentation, consultations with elders and cultural custodians, and community-based verification procedures. Each proverb was documented alongside its literal translation, contextual interpretation, communicative function, thematic category, and cultural notes. Examination of the corpus revealed that social evaluation constitutes one of the most pervasive pragmatic functions of Ika proverbial discourse. Rather than merely describing social reality, the proverbs repeatedly assess persons, actions, relationships, authority, and outcomes against culturally recognised standards.

Through iterative analysis, five major evaluative logics emerged as recurrent principles organising social judgement within the corpus: consequence-based evaluation, which focuses on the outcomes of actions; hierarchical evaluation, which concerns authority, legitimacy, and experience; prudential evaluation, which emphasises foresight and practical wisdom; reciprocity-based evaluation, which addresses mutual obligations and relational balance; and moral accountability, which evaluates character, diligence, and integrity. Although these evaluative logics are not mutually exclusive and often co-occur within individual proverbs, they provide a useful framework for understanding how social evaluation is organised in Ika discourse. Table 2 summarises the five evaluative logics, their primary focus, and the central evaluative questions that guide each form of judgement.

To make the analytical material visible before the detailed findings, the corpus is represented below by the original-language examples discussed in Sections 5.2–5.6, alongside their English renderings and interpretive categories. These examples are illustrative rather than a frequency-based sample; no category prevalence is inferred from them.

Table 1. Illustrative Ika proverb data and analytical categories

Ika proverb	English translation	Evaluative logic
Ewu hụn sị nị ọ nụ kọ ihiẹn e zu ikẹn imẹ ite	A goat that fails to listen to advice rests in the cooking pot.	Consequence-based
Nzịnzịn iki ntị e'sọn ozun a'la imẹ ili	A stubborn fly follows the corpse to the grave.	Consequence-based
Okẹnyẹn ọba ma rịn ihiẹn gha e'ku oku, nwata rị ẹfọ a'gba nkịtịn	When a wise old man speaks, a child in the womb remains quiet.	Hierarchical
Obi suo ajen	The king never walks alone.	Hierarchical
Ébe ẹka nwata ru k'o kẹnye ẹkpa	A child hangs his bag within the reach of his arms.	Prudential
Nsị rị ikẹn e' gbu onyẹ ọ'bia	The faeces in the anus kills a stranger.	Prudential
Ọkọkọ e sị ibe ẹ ọhiọrọ	The snail mocks its mate for experiencing watery mouth.	Reciprocity-based
Onyen sini alī rī ékpokpo e, yamani yari ékpokpo ali	If a person complains that the community is troubling him, know that he is the one troubling the community.	Reciprocity-based
Orukẹ aniniéféré banye	When thick clouds gather, the lazy farmer finds an excuse for not going to the farm.	Moral accountability

Ika proverb	English translation	Evaluative logic
W'aru ugbo adọ ọnữ ogbo	The farm is the right place to prove one's strength as a hard worker.	Moral accountability

Table 2. Evaluative logics identified in the Ika proverb corpus

Evaluative Logic	Primary Focus	Central Evaluative Question
Consequence-Based Evaluation	Outcomes of actions	What consequences result from this behaviour?
Hierarchical Evaluation	Authority, legitimacy, experience	Who has the right or competence to act, speak, or decide?
Prudential Evaluation	Foresight and practical wisdom	Was the action wise, realistic, and well considered?
Reciprocity-Based Evaluation	Mutual obligations and relationships	Does the behaviour reflect fairness and relational responsibility?
Moral Accountability	Character, diligence, integrity	What does the behaviour reveal about moral responsibility?

5.2 Consequence-based evaluation

Consequence-based evaluation judges behaviour through its outcomes. In these proverbs, consequences function as evidence of wisdom, responsibility, or folly. Consider the proverb: Ewu hụn sị nị ọ nụ kọ ihiẹn e zu ikẹn imẹ ite (A goat that fails to listen to advice rests in the cooking pot.) At the literal level, the proverb depicts a goat whose refusal to heed warning ultimately leads to its death. However, the communicative significance of the proverb lies not in the animal itself but in the evaluative relationship established between stubbornness and consequence. The proverb is typically invoked when an individual ignores guidance and subsequently experiences an avoidable setback. Its primary speech act is warning, although it simultaneously performs criticism and retrospective judgement.

From the perspective of appraisal theory (Martin & White 2005), the proverb encodes a strongly negative judgement of both propriety and capacity. The target is evaluated as lacking the practical wisdom necessary to recognise beneficial advice and the self-discipline required to act upon it. Importantly, the judgement is not stated explicitly but emerges inferentially through the narrative scenario. The hearer is expected to recognise the causal connection between refusal and destruction and thereby infer the evaluative conclusion.

Ethnopragmatically, the proverb presupposes a cultural script according to which wise persons listen to those with relevant experience. If someone refuses such guidance and later suffers harm, responsibility is attributed primarily to the individual's decision rather than to external circumstances. The proverb thus reveals a culturally grounded understanding of agency and accountability in which consequences retrospectively validate or invalidate behaviour.

A related evaluative logic appears in: Nzịnzịn iki ntị e'sọn ozun a'la imẹ ili (A stubborn fly follows the corpse to the grave). Like the previous example, this proverb evaluates behaviour through consequence. However, whereas the goat proverb focuses on refusal to listen, the fly proverb evaluates persistence directed toward a destructive object. The image of a fly following a corpse to the grave transforms what might otherwise be interpreted as loyalty or persistence into evidence of poor judgement.

The speech act performed by the proverb combines warning and reproach. Speakers commonly employ it when an individual continues pursuing a course of action despite obvious signs of danger or futility. The proverb therefore challenges the assumption that persistence is inherently virtuous. Instead, it proposes a culturally specific distinction between prudent perseverance and reckless attachment.

From an appraisal perspective, the proverb encodes a negative judgement of capacity because the target fails to recognise circumstances requiring withdrawal or reconsideration. The evaluative force derives not from persistence itself but from the inability to distinguish beneficial persistence from self-destructive persistence. The proverb therefore reveals an indigenous evaluative logic in which wisdom depends not merely on determination but on discernment.

Taken together, these examples reveal that consequence-based evaluation occupies a central position within Ika social reasoning. Actions are judged according to their effects, and outcomes function as culturally recognised evidence of wisdom or folly. Through indirect imagery, the proverbs transform personal criticism into communal evaluation, enabling speakers to regulate conduct while maintaining social relationships.

5.3 Hierarchical evaluation

A second major evaluative logic emerging from the corpus is hierarchical evaluation. In these proverbs, conduct is assessed in relation to age, experience, authority, legitimacy, and social position. Evaluation therefore depends not only on what is said or done but also on who performs the action and the social relationships within which it occurs. Hierarchy is presented not merely as a structure of power but as a framework for interpreting competence, legitimacy, and appropriate behaviour.

A particularly revealing example is: Okẹnyẹn ọba ma rịn ihiẹn gha e'ku oku, nwata rị ẹfọ a'gba nkịtịn (When a wise old man speaks, a child in the womb remains quiet). The proverb constructs a dramatic contrast between elder wisdom and extreme youth. The unborn child represents the furthest possible distance from experience, while the elder embodies accumulated knowledge and social authority. At the pragmatic level, the proverb is frequently used to discourage interruption, challenge youthful arrogance, or emphasise the value of experience.

Within appraisal theory, the proverb encodes positive judgement of capacity and social esteem with respect to the elder, while simultaneously positioning premature speech by the inexperienced as negatively evaluated. The contrast creates an evaluative hierarchy in which knowledge and authority are treated as socially consequential resources.

Ethnopragmatically, the proverb invokes a cultural script that recognises experience as a legitimate basis for authority. Knowledge is not treated as evenly distributed across social actors. Rather, age and accumulated experience confer interpretive rights and responsibilities. The proverb therefore reveals a culturally embedded model of epistemic hierarchy.

The proverb's indirectness is equally important. Rather than directly accusing someone of disrespect, the speaker invokes a culturally familiar image whose implications are readily understood. This allows correction to occur without overt confrontation, illustrating how face concerns are managed through proverb use.

Similarly: Obi suo ajen (The king never walks alone). This proverb evaluates leadership through collective recognition. Unlike the previous example, which emphasises ownership, the king proverb highlights social endorsement. Authority is represented as relational rather than purely individual. A king walks with followers because leadership depends upon recognition, support, and legitimacy.

From a stance perspective, speakers invoking the proverb align themselves with a communal understanding of authority as socially constituted. Ethnopragmatically, the proverb reflects a worldview in which status and leadership derive from relationships rather than from isolated personal qualities. Evaluation therefore combines hierarchy with communal validation.

Collectively, these proverbs demonstrate that hierarchical evaluation in Ika discourse extends beyond obedience to authority. The proverbs assess legitimacy, competence, ownership, experience, and recognition through culturally shared principles that define appropriate social relations. Hierarchy therefore functions not merely as a social structure but as an evaluative framework through which persons and actions are interpreted and judged. This observation resonates with Lomotey and Chachu's (2020) finding that African proverbs frequently reproduce and legitimise socially recognised power relations. In both contexts, proverbial discourse functions as a mechanism through which authority structures are evaluated, justified, and maintained.

5.4 Prudential evaluation

A third evaluative logic emerging from the corpus is prudential evaluation. Whereas consequence-based evaluation assesses conduct retrospectively through its outcomes, prudential evaluation concerns the quality of judgement exercised before action is taken. The proverbs in this category evaluate foresight, preparedness, moderation, contextual awareness, and practical intelligence. Across the corpus, wisdom is represented not as abstract knowledge but as the capacity to anticipate consequences, recognise limitations, and act appropriately within particular circumstances.

A representative example is: *Ébe ẹka nwata ru k'o kẹnye ẹkpa* (A child does not hang a bag beyond the reach of his arm). At the literal level, the proverb describes a child placing an object where it can be conveniently retrieved. Pragmatically, however, the expression functions as advice, warning, and evaluation. It is commonly invoked when individuals undertake responsibilities beyond their competence, pursue unrealistic ambitions, or ignore practical constraints.

From the perspective of appraisal theory, the proverb encodes a positive judgement of capacity because the child demonstrates realistic self-assessment and practical competence. The evaluative force derives from the contrast between prudent action and unrealistic aspiration. What is praised is not caution for its own sake but the ability to align goals with available resources.

The proverb also illustrates stance-taking as a process of alignment with communal expectations. By invoking the proverb, speakers position themselves alongside a culturally valued model of practical wisdom while simultaneously distancing themselves from behaviours associated with recklessness or overconfidence.

Evaluation therefore becomes a means of reproducing communal norms concerning responsibility and self-knowledge.

Ethnopragmatically, the proverb reflects a cultural script according to which people should understand their capabilities before undertaking significant actions. Social success is not interpreted as the product of ambition alone but as the result of prudent judgement. The proverb therefore reveals a locally grounded conception of wisdom that privileges realism over aspiration detached from circumstance.

Another illustration is: *Nsị rị ikẹn e' gbu onyẹ ọ'bia (The faeces in the anus kills a stranger).* The proverb evaluates ignorance of local realities. Its force lies in the distinction between insider knowledge and outsider vulnerability. The stranger is endangered not because danger is inherently greater for outsiders but because contextual knowledge is absent.

The proverb functions primarily as warning and advice. It encourages caution when entering unfamiliar environments and highlights the importance of learning local norms before acting. From an ethnopragmatic perspective, the proverb encodes a culturally significant understanding of knowledge as situated and experiential. Practical wisdom derives from familiarity with local conditions rather than abstract intelligence alone.

Collectively, these proverbs reveal that prudential evaluation occupies a central place within Ika social reasoning. Wise persons are represented as realistic, prepared, and contextually aware. Prudence is associated with recognising limitations, anticipating consequences, and acquiring relevant knowledge before acting, while imprudence is linked to unrealistic ambition and ignorance of social realities.

5.5 Reciprocity-based evaluation

A fourth evaluative logic concerns reciprocity. Social relationships throughout the corpus are interpreted through principles of mutuality, balance, and relational accountability. Actions are judged not solely according to individual intention but according to how they affect others and how they correspond to obligations generated through social relationships.

One of the clearest illustrations is: *Ọkọkọ e sị ibe ẹ ọhịọrọ* (The snail mocks its mate for experiencing watery mouth). The proverb evaluates hypocrisy through ironic comparison. Since both snails possess the same condition, the criticism becomes self-contradictory. The target of evaluation is therefore not the criticised snail but the evaluator whose judgement lacks consistency.

Pragmatically, the proverb performs indirect reprimand. Rather than openly accusing someone of hypocrisy, the speaker invokes an image that allows the audience to infer the criticism independently. This indirectness reduces interpersonal threat while preserving evaluative force. Consistent with face and relational work theories, the proverb enables criticism without direct personal attack.

Within appraisal theory, the proverb encodes a negative judgement of propriety because the evaluator violates expectations of fairness. Through stance-taking, speakers align themselves with communal expectations concerning self-awareness and reciprocity while distancing themselves from hypocritical conduct.

Ethnopragmatically, the proverb reflects a cultural script according to which people should not condemn in others what they tolerate in themselves. Evaluation is therefore regulated by reciprocal standards rather than unilateral authority.

A further illustration appears in:

Onyen sini alī rī ékpokpo e, yamani yari ékpokpo ali (If a person complains that the community is troubling him, know that he is the one troubling the community). This proverb represents one of the strongest expressions of reciprocal evaluation within the corpus. The direction of blame is reversed, and the complainant becomes the object of scrutiny. Rather than accepting claims of victimhood uncritically, the proverb encourages examination of one's own role in generating conflict.

The speech act combines diagnosis, criticism, and social correction. Through appraisal theory, the proverb negatively evaluates social responsibility because the individual fails to recognise his or her contribution to communal tension. From a stance perspective, speakers align with communal harmony rather than individual grievance. The proverb thus reflects a worldview in which social relationships are mutually constituted and moral accountability is shared.

5.6 Moral accountability

The final evaluative logic concerns moral accountability. Many proverbs assess individuals according to responsibility, diligence, sincerity, and integrity. Consider: *Orukẹ aniniéféré banye* (When thick clouds gather, the lazy farmer finds an excuse for not going to the farm). The proverb evaluates laziness through rationalisation. The clouds do not create the laziness; they merely provide a convenient justification for behaviour that already exists. The target of evaluation is therefore not the weather but the individual's tendency to evade responsibility.

Pragmatically, the proverb performs exposure and criticism. It challenges attempts to transfer responsibility from the self to external conditions. Within appraisal theory, it encodes a negative judgement of

tenacity because the target lacks diligence and perseverance. Ethnopragmatically, the proverb reflects a cultural expectation that individuals should fulfil obligations regardless of minor obstacles.

Another example is: *W'aru ugbo adọ ọnữ ogbo* (The farm is the right place to prove one's strength as a hard worker). This proverb evaluates claims through evidence. Hard work is not established through self-description but through performance. The proverb therefore challenges empty boasting and privileges demonstrable achievement.

The speech act functions as advice and correction. Through appraisal theory, the proverb positively evaluates capacity and tenacity while negatively positioning unsupported claims. Stance-taking occurs as speakers align with a communal preference for evidence-based judgement rather than self-promotion.

5.7 Evaluative logics of indigenous judgement

Taken together, the findings reveal that Ika proverbs constitute a culturally organised system of social evaluation. Although individual proverbs address diverse topics, they repeatedly draw upon five interconnected evaluative logics: consequence-based evaluation, hierarchical evaluation, prudential evaluation, reciprocity-based evaluation, and moral accountability. These logics provide culturally recognised principles through which conduct, relationships, authority, and social outcomes are interpreted and judged.

The evaluative force of these proverbs derives not simply from their moral content but from their capacity to invoke shared standards of reasoning. Through proverb use, speakers transform personal opinions into culturally authorised judgements, thereby reinforcing communal understandings of responsibility, legitimacy, prudence, reciprocity, and moral conduct.

Across these domains, the theoretical frameworks employed in this study converge productively. Ethnopragmatics reveals the cultural scripts that make the evaluations intelligible. Appraisal theory illuminates how judgements of propriety, capacity, tenacity, and social esteem are encoded. Stance-taking theory demonstrates how speakers align themselves with communal values through proverb use. Face and relational work theories explain how criticism and correction are achieved indirectly through metaphor, analogy, and narrative imagery. Indigenous communicative logics reveal how evaluation contributes to social cohesion, moral pedagogy, and the reproduction of communal knowledge.

The corpus therefore suggests that Ika proverbs are not merely repositories of wisdom or vehicles of moral instruction. They constitute a culturally organised evaluative framework through which social reality is interpreted and moral order is maintained. Through recurring images of animals, farming, kinship, leadership, and everyday experience, the proverbs transform social observation into communal judgement and convert cultural knowledge into practical frameworks for evaluating conduct.

6. Discussion

The findings show that Ika proverbs organise social evaluation through five interrelated logics: consequence-based evaluation, hierarchical evaluation, prudential evaluation, reciprocity-based evaluation, and moral accountability. These logics demonstrate that judgement in Ika proverbial discourse is not arbitrary or merely individual. Rather, it is structured through culturally recognised principles concerning consequences, authority, foresight, relational responsibility, and character.

This finding extends African proverb scholarship by shifting attention from what proverbs communicate to how they organise judgement. In doing so, the study complements broader pragmatic and sociolinguistic approaches to proverb research. Lomotey and Csajbok-Twerefou (2021), for example, argue that proverbs should be understood as dynamic communicative resources whose meanings emerge through their social and cultural deployment. The present study extends this perspective by demonstrating that one important dimension of such deployment involves the organisation of social evaluation through recurring evaluative logics.

Previous studies have shown that proverbs transmit cultural values, regulate behaviour, facilitate socialisation, construct social meaning, and reproduce communal ideologies and normative expectations (Yankah 1989; Odebunmi 2008; Finnegan 2012; Bobuafor 2021; Dzahene-Quarshie & Omari 2021). In particular, Bobuafor's (2021) analysis of Tafi and Ewe proverbs demonstrates how proverbial discourse functions as a culturally recognised mechanism for transmitting social values and guiding behaviour, a finding that resonates with the evaluative role identified in Ika proverbial discourse.

Similarly, Lomotey and Chachu (2020) show that proverbs participate in the construction and maintenance of gendered power relations. The present study extends this line of inquiry by demonstrating that beneath such ideological functions lie broader evaluative logics through which actions, persons, authority, and relationships are interpreted and assessed. These findings suggest that proverbial discourse not only reproduces social ideologies but also provides culturally shared principles for organising social judgement.

The study also contributes to ethnopragmatics by showing how cultural scripts operate as evaluative frameworks. The force of the proverbs cannot be explained through literal meaning alone. Their interpretation

depends on shared assumptions about responsibility, seniority, prudence, reciprocity, and moral conduct. Similarly, the findings extend appraisal theory by demonstrating that judgement is often realised indirectly through metaphor, analogy, animal imagery, and narrative contrast rather than through explicit evaluative vocabulary.

The analysis further suggests that proverb use is a distinctive form of stance-taking. Speakers who invoke proverbs align themselves with communal wisdom and present evaluation as socially authorised rather than merely personal. This helps explain why proverbs are effective in warning, advising, criticising, and correcting behaviour. Their indirectness also performs relational work because criticism can be communicated without direct confrontation.

The study is limited by its reliance on a documented proverb corpus rather than naturally occurring interaction. Although culturally verified interpretations provide strong evidence of evaluative reasoning, future research should examine how Ika proverbs are deployed in actual conversational settings. Comparative work across other Igboid and African proverb traditions would also help determine whether the evaluative logics identified here are specific to Ika discourse or more widely shared.

7. Conclusion

This study examined Ika proverbs as an indigenous system of social evaluation. The analysis identified five evaluative logics through which social judgement is organised: consequence-based evaluation, hierarchical evaluation, prudential evaluation, reciprocity-based evaluation, and moral accountability. These logics show how Ika proverbs assess conduct, assign responsibility, legitimise authority, regulate relationships, and interpret social outcomes.

The study contributes to pragmatics by demonstrating that social evaluation is not only an interactional process but also a culturally structured mode of reasoning embedded in inherited discourse traditions. It also extends African proverb scholarship by showing that proverbs do more than transmit values or moral lessons. They provide culturally recognised frameworks through which communities judge behaviour and maintain social order.

Although the analysis is based on a documented corpus rather than naturally occurring interaction, it offers a foundation for further research on proverb use in everyday discourse. Future studies may examine how speakers deploy Ika proverbs in actual communicative settings or compare evaluative logics across other African proverbial traditions.

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