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Swahili Proverbs, Idioms and Sayings Used by Teachers and Parents: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Ego Formation and Implications for Egoless Pedagogy

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Abstract: *Swahili proverbs, idioms and sayings are widely used in socialisation and education, yet their possible role in constructing ego-oriented dispositions has received limited critical attention. This study examined how selected expressions used by parents and teachers may construct ego-related meanings and considered their implications for egoless pedagogy in Tanzania. A qualitative documentary review guided by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examined a purposive corpus of 28 expressions: 10 proverbs, 8 idioms and 10 sayings. The population comprised Swahili expressions used as resources for children's socialisation and education; a documentary review checklist guided selection and analysis. Fairclough's three-dimensional model was used to examine textual, discursive and social dimensions. The analysis identified three forms of ego construction: Authority Ego, Defensive Ego and Image Ego. Authority Ego centred on hierarchy, obedience, rank and control; Defensive Ego on pride, resistance to correction and protection of self-concept; and Image Ego on masculinity, achievement, emotional control, gender roles and social status. The study recommends that parents and teachers use such expressions critically, linking respect with dialogue, correction with learning, and strength with humility and responsible relationships. The study concludes that indigenous Swahili expressions can be retained as cultural resources while being reinterpreted to cultivate egolessness.*

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Egoless Pedagogy, Swahili idioms, Swahili proverbs, Swahili sayings*

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1. Introduction

Language plays an important role in socialisation and identity formation. Through everyday communication, children learn cultural values, norms, behaviours, and expectations from the people around them. In Swahili-speaking communities, proverbs, idioms, and sayings, commonly referred to as Methali, Nahau, and Misemo, form an important part of this process (Shatokhina, 2025). They are used to advise, warn, praise, correct, discipline, and guide children in both family and educational settings (Avoseh, 2012; Mazigo et al., 2024; Yakub et al., 2025). Through these expressions, children learn not only what to do, but also how to understand themselves, authority, knowledge, and their relationships with others.

Parents and teachers are the most influential discourse agents in a child's life. The language they use carries authority and legitimacy, making it easily internalised by learners. Swahili proverbs such as "*Mtoto wa nyoka*

ni nyoka" (a snake's offspring is also a snake), idioms like "kichwa ngumu" (a stubborn or hard-headed person), and sayings like "mwanaume halii" (a man does not cry) are often used with good intentions to build discipline and resilience (Badru, 2019; Dzahene-Quarshie & Omari, 2021). However, from a critical perspective, such expressions may unconsciously embed values that promote superiority, fear of questioning authority, and the need to protect self-image, which are the core elements of ego behaviour.

Ego behaviour, defined as an inflated sense of self-importance, defensiveness, and inability to accept mistakes or learn from others, is a challenge that can affect learning and interpersonal relationships (Prakoso et al., 2026; Thangarajathi, 2010). In education, it may manifest in students' fear of asking questions, admitting ignorance, or accepting correction (Lucas et al., 2022). In the workplace, it may appear as an unwillingness to receive feedback, acknowledge mistakes, or learn from colleagues regardless of their position (Chen, 2026). In social interaction, it may be reflected in difficulties with apologising, seeking help, accepting different perspectives, or showing vulnerability (Thangarajathi, 2010). Understanding ego behaviour therefore requires attention not only to individual characteristics but also to the socialisation processes through which children learn ideas about authority, competence, status, and acceptable behaviour.

In contrast to ego behaviour, egolessness emphasises humility, interdependence, openness to correction, collaborative learning, and willingness to learn from others. This orientation is consistent with the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasises human interconnectedness, mutual recognition, and the understanding that an individual's identity and wellbeing are closely connected to relationships with other people (Ngubane & Makua, 2021; Samuel, 2023). The Swahili expression "*Mtu ni watu*" (a person is a person through other people) reflects this relational understanding of human life (Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE), 2019). In education, egolessness encourages learners to acknowledge what they do not know, ask questions, receive correction, cooperate with others, and value knowledge beyond personal status. In this sense, egoless pedagogy promotes learning relationships based on humility and mutual learning rather than superiority and protection of self-image.

Although Swahili proverbs, idioms, and sayings have been widely documented and studied for their linguistic, cultural, moral, and social significance, less attention has been given to how these linguistic forms used by parents and teachers can perpetuate ego-oriented behaviour or shape egolessness. The meanings communicated through everyday expressions may influence how children understand authority, obedience, knowledge, correction, status, cooperation, and interpersonal relationships. The aim of this study was to critically examine the ways in which Swahili proverbs, idioms, and sayings could be used to perpetuate ego behaviour and/or shape egolessness, and how these dispositions in turn relate to education, work, and social life. The study therefore connected the analysis of Swahili pedagogical language with the broader need for learning and social environments characterised by humility, openness to correction, mutual learning, cooperation, and respect for others.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Literature Review

This study was guided by Social Learning Theory and Ubuntu Philosophy. Social Learning Theory, developed by Bandura (1977), explains that children acquire behaviours, attitudes, values, and patterns of interaction through observation, modelling, imitation, and reinforcement. Parents and teachers are important models because children observe how they communicate, exercise authority, respond to mistakes, give correction, and relate to others. In this study, Swahili proverbs, idioms, and sayings used by parents and teachers are understood as part of the social environment through which children encounter and learn culturally valued ways of thinking and behaving. Repeated expressions that emphasise obedience, superiority, status, or emotional control may reinforce ego-oriented dispositions, while expressions that encourage humility, cooperation, openness to correction, and learning from others may support egolessness. The theory therefore explains how repeated adult language and behaviour can contribute to the development of dispositions towards authority, self-image, correction, cooperation, and interpersonal relationships.

Ubuntu Philosophy provides an African philosophical basis for understanding egolessness. Ubuntu emphasises human interconnectedness, relational personhood, mutual recognition, cooperation, respect, and the understanding that individual wellbeing is connected to the wellbeing of others (Ngubane & Makua, 2021; Samuel, 2023). This relational view, also discussed in contemporary Ubuntu scholarship (Samuel, 2023), is reflected in the Swahili expression "*Mtu ni watu*" (a person is a person through other people) (Taasisi ya Taaluma za Kiswahili, 2013). In education, Ubuntu supports humility, mutual learning, respect, cooperation, openness to correction, and recognition that knowledge can be shared among people regardless of status. These principles are closely related to egoless pedagogy, which values learning without excessive concern for superiority, personal status, or protection of self-image. Ubuntu therefore provides the philosophical basis for examining whether the expressions used by parents and teachers reinforce hierarchical and self-protective orientations or encourage relational, cooperative, and humble ways of learning and interacting.

2.2 Empirical Literature Review

Previous studies have shown that African proverbs and sayings play an important role in children's socialisation, moral development, and transmission of cultural values. For example, Abera (2019) found that Arsi Oromo proverbs contributed to children's acquisition of cultural norms, values, beliefs, and behavioural expectations. Similarly, Mamaleka and Makgopa (2021) showed that African proverbs communicate moral lessons that influence children's socially acceptable behaviour. These findings demonstrate that indigenous expressions are important pedagogical resources through which children learn how to behave and relate to others. However, Dzahene-Quarshie and Omari (2021) showed that Swahili proverbs can also communicate broader social assumptions, particularly concerning gender roles and social status. Although these studies establish the role of indigenous expressions in socialisation and the communication of social values, they did not examine how such expressions may construct ego-oriented dispositions or support egolessness, particularly within the relationships between parents, teachers, and children.

The relational and collaborative values contained in Swahili proverbs are further demonstrated by Mazigo et al. (2024), who analysed 45 Swahili proverbs and identified values related to participation, co-learning, co-production of knowledge, corrective action, and recognition of different forms of knowledge. Similarly, Mazigo (2024) identified trusted relationships, humane relations, co-generation of knowledge, co-learning, co-validation, and recognition of diverse forms of knowledge as important principles within Swahili proverbial wisdom. These findings are closely related to egolessness because they emphasise humility, cooperation, mutual learning, openness to correction, and recognition of knowledge beyond individual status. However, both studies were situated within development evaluation rather than teaching, parenting, and child socialisation, and neither examined how Swahili proverbs, idioms, and sayings can simultaneously reinforce ego-oriented dispositions such as superiority, unquestioned obedience, defensiveness, and protection of self-image.

Despite these contributions, an important gap remains in understanding the relationship between Swahili proverbs, idioms, and sayings used by parents and teachers and the formation of ego-oriented or egoless dispositions. Existing studies have largely examined indigenous expressions in relation to cultural transmission, moral behaviour, gender ideology, and collaborative values, while limited attention has been given to their implications for authority, self-image, correction, humility, and interpersonal relationships. In particular, little empirical attention has been given to the possibility that the same linguistic repertoire can contain expressions that reinforce ego behaviour alongside expressions that encourage egolessness. This study addresses this gap by examining Swahili proverbs, idioms, and sayings used in pedagogical contexts and considering their implications for egoless pedagogy and later education, work, and social life.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach and Design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach with a documentary review design guided by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The documentary review design was appropriate because the data consisted of Swahili proverbs, idioms, and sayings that were already available in books, dictionaries, and publicly accessible digital sources.

3.2 Population of the Study

The study population comprised Swahili proverbs, idioms, and sayings used in the socialisation and education. The population included proverbs, idioms and sayings documented in Swahili literature, dictionaries, and publicly available communicative materials associated with parents and teachers. The population was therefore conceptualised as the wider body of Swahili linguistic expressions that could function as pedagogical or socialisation resources.

3.3 Sample and Sampling Technique

A total of 28 linguistic items were purposively selected for analysis, comprising 10 proverbs (Methali), 8 idioms (Nahau), and 10 sayings (Misemo). Purposive sampling was used because the study required expressions that were directly relevant to its focus on authority, self-image, superiority, vulnerability, obedience, correction, cooperation, and interpersonal relationships. The selected expressions were required to be relevant to contexts in which parents or teachers advise, discipline, correct, motivate, or socialise children and to be traceable to credible sources such as published books, recognised dictionaries, or verifiable publicly available digital materials.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through documentary review of published and publicly accessible sources. The researcher identified, selected, recorded, and organised relevant Swahili proverbs, idioms, and sayings from the identified sources. A corpus containing 28 linguistic items was developed and systematically organised according to the original Swahili expression, its English translation, the context in which it could be used by parents or teachers, and its intended moral or pedagogical message. A documentary review checklist was also used to ensure that the selected items met the

inclusion criteria and were relevant to the study's focus on authority, ego, self-image, correction, humility, cooperation, and interpersonal relationships.

3.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using Fairclough (1993)'s three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis. The analysis proceeded from the textual features of the selected expressions to their discursive meanings and finally to their broader social implications. At the textual level, each proverb, idiom, and saying was examined in terms of word choice, metaphor, presupposition, implied meaning, and linguistic construction. For example, the expression "Mwanaume halii" (a man does not cry) was examined in relation to its presupposition that crying or emotional expression represents weakness. At the level of discursive practice, the analysis considered how parents and teachers may use such expressions to communicate expectations, establish authority, provide correction, and influence children's understanding of acceptable behaviour. At the level of social practice, the analysis examined how the meanings communicated through these expressions may reinforce orientations such as unquestioned obedience, superiority, defensiveness, emotional suppression, and protection of self-image, while other expressions may encourage humility, cooperation, openness to correction, mutual learning, and recognition of others. The analysis resulted in three emergent themes: Authority Ego, Defensive Ego, and Image Ego. A thematic analysis matrix was subsequently used to connect each expression with its linguistic meaning, pedagogical context, ego-related construct, and implications for education, work, and social interaction.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles of academic integrity, objectivity and respect to cultural values, which were observed in study. The study focused on the Swahili proverbs, idioms and sayings found in literature, dictionaries and readily accessible communicative texts, hence the researcher made sure to cite all the sources correctly with appropriate academic referencing. Interpretation of expressions was fair, not allowing for cultural stereotyping or misrepresentation or unjustified generalisations about the Swahili speaking communities. The researcher made a differentiation between the meaning of expressions and their potential social implications. Moreover, the analysis took into account cultural diversity and did not and did not present indigenous expressions as automatically destructive, thereby responsibly interpreting and presenting the findings.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

The analysis revealed that Swahili proverbs, idioms and sayings used by parents and teachers, while culturally valued, can discursively construct three forms of ego that may undermine egolessness. The Critical Discourse Analysis identified Authority Ego, Defensive Ego and Image Ego. Only expressions that could be traced to accessible published dictionaries, educational materials, proverb collections or academic documents were retained. The analysis concerned discursive possibilities and does not claim that an expression automatically causes ego behaviour.

4.1.1 Common Swahili Proverbs Used by Teachers and Parents

The first pattern concerned proverbs that position elders, parents, leaders or socially recognised persons as legitimate sources of authority. The analysis focused on how these expressions can privilege obedience, hierarchy and adult control over reciprocal learning.

Table 1; Analysis of Proverbs Used by Teachers and Parents

No.	Swahili Proverb	English Translation	CDA Insight – Hidden Ego Message	Implications for Egolessness	Source
1	*Asiyesikia la mkuu huvunjika guu*.	He who does not heed the elder breaks his leg.	The senior person's advice is constructed as authoritative; failure to heed it is associated with harm.	May discourage respectful questioning of authority.	(Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE), 2019)
2	*Samaki mkunje angali mbichi*.	Bend the fish while it is still fresh.	The child is represented as needing early shaping by adults.	Can support strong adult control if interpreted as	(Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE), 2019)

				compulsory shaping.	
3	*Asiyefunzwa na mamaye hufunzwa na ulimwengu*.	He who is not taught by his mother is taught by the world.	Parental instruction is constructed as a central mechanism of socialisation.	May privilege adult instruction over independent discovery when applied rigidly.	(Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE), 2019)
4	*Mchelea mwana kulia, hulia yeye*.	He who fears the child's crying eventually cries himself.	Adult correction is represented as necessary despite the child's resistance.	Can legitimise corrective authority over dialogue.	(Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE), 2019)
5	*Mtoto wa nyoka ni nyoka*.	The offspring of a snake is a snake.	Identity and expected character are linked to ancestry or parental identity.	Can constrain independent identity and the possibility of change.	(Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE), 2019)
6	*Kila mtu akae kwa cheo chake*.	Let every person remain in his or her rank.	Social relations are organised through rank and status.	May discourage lower-status learners from questioning higher-status persons.	(Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE), 2019)
7	*Kisigino hufuata mguu*.	The heel follows the foot.	The subordinate is represented as following the person who leads.	May reinforce hierarchical teacher–learner relationships.	(Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE), 2019)
8	*Mwenye nguvu mpishe*.	Let the strong person pass.	Social interaction is represented as requiring accommodation of the powerful.	May normalise power-based relationships rather than dialogue.	(Taasisi ya Taaluma za Kiswahili, 2013)
9	*Mtu mume ni kazi*.	To be a man is to work.	Male social worth is linked to productive achievement.	May connect respect with performance and make admission of inability difficult.	(Badru, 2019)
10	*Mume ni kazi, mke ni nguo*.	A man works; a wife dresses.	Gendered social roles position the man as provider and the woman differently.	May reproduce status-based identities in socialisation.	(Badru, 2019)

The proverbs show a recurrent discourse of hierarchy, obedience and socially recognised authority.*Asiyesikia la mkuu huvunjika guu*is particularly relevant because the consequence attached to not heeding the senior person can position obedience as safer than questioning.*Kila mtu akae kwa cheo chake*and*Kisigino hufuata mguu*similarly foreground rank and following. In education, such meanings may become problematic when respect is transformed into unquestionable authority. The finding therefore concerns the discursive possibility of constructing a relationship in which the

adult speaks and the learner follows, which is in tension with egoless pedagogy's emphasis on questioning, mutual learning and openness to correction.

4.1.2 Common Swahili Idioms Used by Teachers and Parents

The second pattern emerged from nahau that label personal characteristics, pride, leadership, self-presentation and resistance to change. These expressions operate strongly at the level of the individual's self-concept.

Table 2; Analysis of idioms (Nahau) Used by Teachers and Parents

No.	Swahili Idiom (Nahau)	English Translation	CDA Insight – Hidden Ego Message	Implications for Egolessness	Source
1	*Kichwa kigumu*.	Hard-headed / obstinate person.	The individual is labelled as resistant to advice or correction.	Correction may be experienced as a threat to identity.	(Taasisi ya Taaluma za Kiswahili, 2013)
2	*Kuvimba kichwa*.	To become big-headed / arrogant.	Excessive self-importance is explicitly represented as arrogance.	May reduce openness to feedback.	(Taasisi ya Taaluma za Kiswahili, 2013)
3	*Jipa kichwa*.	To become proud.	The individual is constructed as elevating the self.	May strengthen self-protection when competence is challenged.	(Taasisi ya Taaluma za Kiswahili, 2013)
4	*Kumpa mtu kichwa*.	To spoil or pamper someone.	Excessive approval is represented as capable of producing an inflated self-image.	Excessive praise may make later criticism difficult to accept.	(Taasisi ya Taaluma za Kiswahili, 2013)
5	*Shika hatamu*.	To take control / to lead.	Leadership is linguistically framed through control of the reins.	Can encourage leadership based on control rather than shared responsibility.	(Taasisi ya Taaluma za Kiswahili, 2013)
6	*Shika usukani*.	To take the steering wheel / to lead.	The leader is positioned as the person directing the course of action.	May make leadership appear synonymous with directing others.	(Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE), 2019)
7	*Tia chumvi*.	To exaggerate.	The speaker is represented as adding information beyond what is warranted.	Exaggeration can become part of self-presentation.	(Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE), 2019)

8	*Piga moyo konde*.	To brace oneself / take courage.	The individual is expected to strengthen the self in difficulty.	When applied rigidly, may privilege self-containment over seeking help.	(Taasisi ya Taaluma za Kiswahili, 2013)

The Nahau reveal Defensive Ego through labelling, pride, leadership and self-presentation. *Kichwa kigumu*, kuvimba kichwa and jipa kichwa are particularly relevant because Taasisi ya Taaluma za Kiswahili (2013) records them in connection with obstinacy, arrogance and pride. *Kumpa mtu Kichwa* adds a further dimension by linking excessive approval with an inflated self-image. In work settings, these discourses may become relevant when employees interpret correction as a threat to identity. The result is not that the nahau themselves create defensiveness, but that they provide socially available categories through which pride, stubbornness and status can be named and negotiated.

4.1.3 Common Swahili Sayings Used by Teachers and Parents

The third pattern concerned sayings documented in academic discussion of African and Swahili gender discourse. These expressions construct socially valued images of masculinity, strength, achievement and emotional control.

Table 3; Analysis of Sayings (misemo) Used by Teachers and Parents

No.	Swahili Saying/Expression	English Translation	CDA Insight – Hidden Ego Message	Implications for Egolessness	Source
1	*Jikaze kiume*.	Be strong like a man.	Masculinity is associated with toughness and endurance.	May discourage acknowledgement of vulnerability and help-seeking.	(Badru, 2019)
2	*Kufa kiume*.	Die like a man.	Masculine identity is constructed through endurance and refusal to show weakness.	Can make admission of difficulty appear inconsistent with masculine identity.	(Badru, 2019)
3	*Mwanamume halii anagugumia*.	A man does not cry; he groans.	Open emotional expression is represented as inconsistent with masculine identity.	May discourage men from expressing pain or vulnerability.	(Badru, 2019)
4	*Mwanamume mashine*.	A man is a machine.	Masculine worth is associated with sexual capability and performance.	Can create pressure to maintain an image of exceptional capability.	(Badru, 2019)
5	*Mume ni moto wa koko, usipowaka hufuka*.	A husband is like a wild fire; if he does not burn, he smoulders.	Male identity is linked to sexual potency and performance.	May make acknowledgement of inadequacy socially difficult.	(Badru, 2019)

6	*Raha ya mume tuwe wanne*.	For the husband's pleasure, let us be four.	Masculine status is associated with multiple sexual relationships.	Can connect male social worth with a performance-based image of masculinity.	(Badru, 2019)
7	*Mtoto mjinga mzigo kwa mamaye*.	A foolish child is a burden to the mother.	Child competence is linked to family responsibility and reputation.	May encourage protection of competence-image rather than open discussion of difficulty.	(Badru, 2019)
8	*Nyumba ni mwanamke*.	The woman is the home.	Domestic identity is strongly attached to women and gendered expectations.	Can reinforce socially prescribed identities.	(Badru, 2019)
9	*Jogoo halei mwana / Jogoo halei vifaranga*.	The rooster does not raise the child/chicks.	Childcare is constructed as primarily a woman's responsibility.	Can normalise gendered roles and limit men's nurturing participation.	(Badru, 2019)
10	*Mume ni kazi, mke ni nguo*.	A man works; a wife dresses.	Male and female worth are differentiated through prescribed roles.	May strengthen status-based gender identities.	(Badru, 2019)

The sayings show that Image Ego can be constructed through expectations concerning masculinity, emotional control, sexual capability, productivity and gendered social roles. Badru's analysis is particularly relevant because these expressions are discussed as part of socialisation that teaches boys and men how they are expected to understand themselves. *Jikaze kiume*/ kufa kiume and *Mwanamume halii anagugumia* position emotional restraint as a masculine expectation, while *Mwanamume mashine* and Mume ni moto wa koko connect masculinity with performance. Such meanings can conflict with egoless interaction when people feel compelled to protect an image of strength rather than acknowledge uncertainty, seek assistance or admit vulnerability.

4.1.4 Cross-theme synthesis of ego construction and implications for egolessness

The three themes were interconnected. Authority Ego concerns who is entitled to speak and direct others; Defensive Ego concerns protection of an established self-concept when challenged; and Image Ego concerns protection of a socially valued identity.

Table 4; Cross-theme synthesis of ego construction and implications for egolessness

Theme	Dominant Discursive Pattern	Illustrative Expressions	Ego Constructed	Implication for Egolessness
Authority Ego	Hierarchy, obedience, rank and control of legitimate knowledge.	*Asiyesikia la mkuu huvunjika guu* (He who does not heed the elder breaks his leg); *Kila mtu akae kwa cheo chake* (Let every person remain in his or her rank);	The authority knows; the subordinate follows.	May limit questioning, reciprocal learning and correction.

		Kisigino hufuata mguu (The heel follows the foot)		
Defensive Ego	Labelling, pride, self-protection and control of self-concept.	*Kichwa kigumu* (Hard-headed / obstinate person); *Kuvimba kichwa* (To become big-headed / arrogant); *Jipa kichwa* (To become proud); *Kumpa mtu kichwa* (To spoil or pamper someone)	My established self-image must be protected.	May make admitting mistakes, receiving feedback and asking for help more difficult.
Image Ego	Masculinity, status, achievement, emotional control and socially approved identity.	*Jikaze kiume* (Be strong like a man); *Mwanamume halii anagugumia* (A man does not cry; he groans); *Mwanamume mashine* (A man is a machine); *Mume ni kazi, mke ni nguo* (A man works; a wife dresses)	I must appear strong, capable and socially acceptable.	May encourage concealment of vulnerability and prioritisation of reputation.

The synthesis indicates that the three forms of ego operate at different but connected levels. Authority Ego organises relationships through hierarchy; Defensive Ego protects the individual's self-concept against correction; and Image Ego protects socially valued identities such as strength, competence, productivity and respectability. Together, these discourses can create tension with egolessness, which requires openness to correction, acknowledgement of uncertainty, willingness to seek assistance and recognition that knowledge can be developed collectively. The findings should not be read as evidence that the expressions inherently cause ego behaviour; rather, the CDA identifies discursive meanings and social possibilities that may be activated when expressions are repeatedly used in socialisation.

4.2 Discussion

The three themes identified in this study; Authority Ego, Defensive Ego and Image Ego represent different attributes through which ego may be constructed and reproduced across the life course. Importantly, the findings do not suggest that individual expressions automatically cause ego behaviour. Rather, repeated exposure to particular forms of discourse, especially when reinforced by parents and teachers, may normalise particular ways of thinking and behaving. The discussion therefore considers not only what these expressions communicate to children, but also how the dispositions they communicate may later influence individuals when they become adults, teachers, parents, employees, leaders or people responsible for others. This perspective is central to egoless pedagogy because it shifts attention from simply teaching children what is culturally acceptable to deliberately cultivating humility, openness to correction, mutual learning and responsible use of authority.

4.2.1Authority Ego

The first theme, Authority Ego, concerns ego attributes associated with superiority based on age, position, status, power and control. The expressions identified in the study suggest that authority ego may involve unquestionable obedience, hierarchical thinking, dependence on rank, intolerance of being challenged and the tendency to equate seniority with correctness. The proverb "*Asiyesikia la mkuu huvunjika guu*" (he who does not heed the elder breaks his leg) may communicate the value of learning from experienced people, but repeated use without space for questioning may also position the elder as inherently more knowledgeable. Similarly, "*Kila mtu akae kwa cheo chake*" (let everyone remain in his or her rank) may establish social order while simultaneously encouraging learners to associate knowledge and voice with status. The nahau "*Shika hatamu*" (take control) and "*Shika usukani*" (take the steering wheel/lead) construct leadership through control and direction, while the misemo "*Mwenye nguvu mpishe*" (give way to the powerful) and "*Jikaze kiume*" (be strong like a man) communicate expectations concerning power and

strength. The critical issue is therefore not whether these expressions have useful moral meanings, but whether their repeated use teaches children that people with greater age, rank, gendered authority or social power have greater entitlement to speak, decide and be obeyed. Such learning may later become problematic when the child becomes an adult who occupies a position of authority. A former learner who has repeatedly experienced authority as unquestionable may reproduce the same pattern when becoming a teacher who discourages students from questioning, a parent who demands obedience without explanation, a supervisor who interprets disagreement as disrespect, or an employee who treats junior colleagues as people whose views carry less value.

Social Learning Theory and Ubuntu Philosophy provide a useful explanation of how this pattern may be reproduced and, importantly, how it can be interrupted. Social Learning Theory proposes that children learn through observation, modelling and reinforcement; therefore, a child does not learn authority only from the words contained in a proverb but also from watching how adults exercise authority (Bandura, 1977). If a parent uses "*Asiyesikia la mkuu huvunjika guu*" to silence a child's question and the child observes that adults themselves are not expected to accept correction, the learner may acquire both the explicit lesson respect elders and the implicit lesson people with authority should not be challenged. This can reinforce an authority-based ego orientation. Ubuntu provides a contrasting relational framework in which respect is connected with mutual recognition, interdependence and collective wellbeing (Samuel, 2023). Under an Ubuntu interpretation, being senior does not remove one's responsibility to listen, learn and recognise the knowledge of others. Therefore, "*Kila mtu akae kwa cheo chake*" can be critically contextualised to teach responsibility associated with one's role without suggesting that one's position makes one's knowledge superior. Likewise, "*Shika hatamu*" and "*Shika usukani*" can be used to teach responsible leadership, where leading means guiding, listening and serving rather than controlling. In this way, the same cultural language can contribute to egolessness when authority is separated from superiority and leadership is connected with service, accountability and mutual learning.

This finding is supported by previous studies that recognise the strong socialising and pedagogical function of African proverbs. Abera (2019) found that Arsi Oromo proverbs are used for disciplining, warning, advising, directing and educating children, demonstrating how proverbial language transmits social norms and behavioural expectations. Mamaleka and Makgopa (2021) similarly show that lessons embedded in African proverbs can be incorporated into socialisation to encourage socially acceptable behaviour among children. Avoseh (2012) identifies African proverbs as important resources for indigenous education because they connect learning with community values and everyday social life. Biswalo (2022), Ohito and Olel (2026) and Zaja (2020) further demonstrate that Swahili proverbs can promote inquiry, collaboration, co-learning and recognition of different forms of knowledge. The present study supports these findings but introduces a critical qualification: the pedagogical power of proverbs is not automatically emancipatory. The same socialising mechanism that transmits respect and responsibility may also transmit hierarchical dispositions. Thus, the issue extends beyond whether proverbs educate children to what kind of adult relational behaviour they may normalise. If a child repeatedly learns that questioning a superior is disrespectful, the disposition may later be expressed in classrooms, families and workplaces through reluctance to accept feedback, intolerance of disagreement or excessive reliance on positional authority. Conversely, if the child learns that authority includes listening and accepting correction, the future teacher, parent, employee or leader may reproduce a more reciprocal form of authority.

The implications for egoless pedagogy are therefore clear. Authority should not be removed from education; rather, its psychological and relational meaning should be transformed. The proverb "*Asiyesikia la mkuu huvunjika guu*" can be used to teach children the importance of learning from experience while simultaneously asking whether elders can also be wrong and whether respectful questioning is compatible with respect. "*Kila mtu akae kwa cheo chake*" can stimulate discussion about role responsibility without teaching that rank determines the value of a person's ideas. The nahau "*Shika hatamu*" and "*Shika usukani*" can be used to develop leadership that includes listening to others, sharing responsibility and accepting correction. The misemo "*Mwenye nguvu mpishe*" and "*Jikaze kiume*" can be critically reframed so that strength means responsible conduct rather than domination or emotional superiority. Such pedagogical use can help children develop an authority orientation in which they can lead without humiliating others, obey without surrendering critical thought, and exercise power without reproducing the power relations through which they themselves were socialised. Egolessness, therefore, is not the rejection of authority; it is the ability to exercise and respond to authority without making status, power or superiority the basis of human worth.

4.2.2 Defensive Ego

The second theme, Defensive Ego, concerns ego attributes associated with resistance to correction, stubbornness, pride, self-protection and difficulty accepting that one's knowledge or behaviour may be inadequate. Whereas Authority Ego primarily concerns how individuals relate to people above or below them in a hierarchy, Defensive Ego concerns how individuals protect themselves when their competence, behaviour or self-image is challenged. The findings provide several examples of this orientation. The nahau "*Kichwa*

kigumu" (hard-headed or stubborn) and "*Kuvimba kichwa*" (to become big-headed or arrogant) explicitly describe resistance and inflated self-perception, while "*Jipa kichwa*" (to become proud) and "*Kumpa mtu kichwa*" (to give someone excessive importance or spoil them) concern the development or reinforcement ofan inflated self-image. The proverbs "*Samaki mkunje angali mbichi*" (bend the fish while still fresh) and "*Mchelea mwana kulia, hulia yeye*" (one who fears making a child cry eventually cries himself or herself) emphasise early correction and discipline. The sayings "*Mtoto mjinga mzigo kwa mamaye*" (a foolish child is a burden to the mother) and "*Mwanamume halii anagugumia*" (a man does not cry; he groans) add dimensions of shame, identity protection and emotional suppression. These expressions may discourage undesirable behaviour, but their repeated use may also teach children that being wrong, weak, uninformed or emotionally vulnerable threatens their social value. This is important for later adult life because a child who learns to protect the self from correction may carry that orientation into adulthood: as a teacher, the person may reject students' criticism; as a parent, may interpret children's disagreement as disrespect; as an employee, may resist feedback from supervisors or colleagues; and as a supervisor, may respond defensively when junior staff identify mistakes. The concern is therefore the possible reproduction of defensive behaviour across relationships rather than the literal meaning of any single expression.

Social Learning Theory and Ubuntu Philosophy together provide a strong basis for understanding this process. Social Learning Theory suggests that children learn responses to correction by observing how significant adults respond when they themselves make mistakes or receive criticism (Bandura, 1977). If adults demand that children accept correction while refusing correction themselves, the child receives a contradictory model: correction is for people with less power, not for people with authority. Such modelling can reinforce defensive ego. Ubuntu provides an alternative because relational personhood assumes that people exist through relationships with others and therefore remain capable of learning from others. From an Ubuntu perspective, saying "I do not know" does not necessarily reduce one's dignity; it can create an opportunity for another person to contribute knowledge. This makes egolessness a learned social practice rather than simply an individual personality trait (Gumede, 2026). Consequently, "*Kichwa kigumu*" should not merely be used to stigmatise a child who resists advice. Instead, the teacher or parent can use it as an opportunity to explore why the learner finds correction difficult. "*Kuvimba kichwa*" and "*Jipa kichwa*" can similarly become prompts for self-reflection about pride, while adults themselves should model the willingness to admit mistakes. In this way, children learn not merely to avoid being called stubborn or proud, but to develop an internal capacity to receive correction without experiencing it as a threat to personal worth.

This finding is supported by previous studies. Mamaleka and Makgopa (2021) demonstrate that African proverbs can be incorporated into socialisation to promote socially acceptable behaviour among children, supporting the present finding that proverbial language participates in behavioural formation. Abera (2019) similarly shows that proverbs perform disciplinary and advisory functions in child socialisation. Avoseh (2012) highlights the role of African oral traditions in transmitting moral knowledge and community expectations, while Mazigo et al. (2024) demonstrate that Swahili proverbs can promote inquiry, co-learning, collaboration and corrective processes. The present study extends these contributions by making a distinction between compliance and egolessness. A child can comply with an adult because of fear, shame or anticipated punishment without developing genuine openness to correction. This distinction is particularly important because the long-term issue is not simply whether the child behaves correctly but whether the learner develops a disposition to learn from others. If correction is consistently associated with humiliation, the resulting adult may attempt to protect professional or parental authority by concealing mistakes, rejecting criticism or blaming others. Conversely, if correction is presented as a normal part of learning, the future teacher, parent, employee or leader may be more willing to receive feedback and acknowledge limitations. The present study therefore extends previous literature by connecting the socialising function of proverbs with the possible development of defensive or non-defensive orientations towards knowledge and correction.

This finding provides a direct opportunity for using Swahili expressions in egoless pedagogy. "*Samaki mkunje angali mbichi*" can be reinterpreted to emphasise that early education should cultivate openness to correction rather than obedience through fear. "*Mchelea mwana kulia, hulia yeye*" can support the idea that responsible guidance requires adults to correct harmful behaviour rather than avoid difficult conversations. The nahau "*Kichwa kigumu*" and "*Kuvimba kichwa*" can be used reflectively, asking learners to identify situations in which pride or stubbornness prevents learning. The misemo "*Mtoto mjinga mzigo kwa mamaye*" and "*Mwanamume halii anagugumia*" require greater critical care: rather than using them to attach permanent labels or suppress vulnerability, teachers and parents can use them to question the consequences of shame, emotional suppression and fear of appearing inadequate. The goal is to move from "I must appear knowledgeable" to "I am willing to learn"; from "I must never be corrected" to "correction helps me improve"; and from "admitting weakness reduces my status" to "asking for help is part of learning." Such practices can interrupt the reproduction of defensive ego across generations because the child learns a different model of adulthood—one in which a teacher can say "I was wrong," a parent can listen to a child, an employee can accept feedback, and a leader can acknowledge the contribution of junior colleagues.

4.2.3 Image Ego

The third theme, Image Ego, concerns ego attributes associated with the protection of a socially desirable identity. The findings indicate that this form of ego is constructed through expectations concerning masculinity, strength, productivity, emotional control, gender roles and social status. The proverb "*Mtu mume ni kazi*" (to be a man is to work) associates masculine identity with productivity, while "*Mume ni kazi, mke ni nguo*" (the man is work, the wife is clothing) constructs differentiated expectations for men and women. The nahau "*Piga moyo konde*" (brace oneself/take courage) may positively communicate resilience, but when combined with gendered expectations it can contribute to an understanding of strength as the suppression of vulnerability. The nahau "*Kuvimba kichwa*" (to become big-headed) also illustrates the concern with maintaining an elevated self-image. The sayings "*Jikaze kiume*" (be strong like a man), "*Mwanamume mashine*" (a man is a machine) and "*Mwanamume halii anagugumia*" (a man does not cry; he groans) construct masculinity through strength, endurance and emotional restraint. These expressions may contribute to Image Ego when the child learns thatsocial acceptance depends on appearing strong, productive, emotionally controlled or superior. The possible adult consequence is that individuals may become more concerned with maintaining an image than with learning or acknowledging limitations. A teacher may avoid admitting that he or she does not know an answer because it threatens professional image; a parent may hide vulnerability to preserve parental authority; an employee may avoid asking for assistance because it may be interpreted as incompetence; and a manager may reject ideas from junior employees because accepting them could weaken the image of being the most knowledgeable person in the room.

Social Learning Theory and Ubuntu Philosophy illuminate how such image-based ego can be reproduced and transformed. Through Social Learning Theory, children observe which identities receive approval and which behaviours attract ridicule or rejection (Bandura, 1977). When boys repeatedly hear "*Jikaze kiume*" and "*Mwanamume halii*," and observe adults praising emotional toughness while discouraging vulnerability, they may learn that appearing invulnerable is part of being a successful man. The lesson can extend beyond gender into a broader ego orientation in which admitting uncertainty becomes socially risky. Ubuntu offers a different conception of personhood because human identity is relational rather than based solely on individual performance or invulnerability (Gumede, 2026). Within this framework, receiving assistance, showing vulnerability and learning from another person do not necessarily diminish one's humanity or dignity. The same principle can therefore be applied pedagogically to "*Mtu mume ni kazi*": work and responsibility can be valued without making productivity the sole measure of personal worth. "*Piga moyo konde*" can be used to encourage resilience while also teaching that resilient people can seek support. This combination of modelling and relational learning provides a pathway towards egolessness in which confidence does not require the performance of superiority, masculinity or perfection.

The interpretation is supported particularly strongly by research on African and Swahili gendered discourse. Dzahene-Quarshie and Omari (2021) found that Akan and Swahili proverbs reflect gender ideologies and communicate culturally embedded assumptions about the roles and status of women and men. Ohito and Olel (2026) and Zaja (2020) similarly demonstrate that proverbial expressions can reproduce expectations concerning women's obedience, gender roles and unequal social positioning. Lema, (2021) in a study of Chaga proverbs in Tanzania, found that selected proverbs can reproduce sexist and patriarchal representations and contribute to shaping beliefs and moral consciousness. Abera (2019) also identified sex-role differentiation, gender inequality and harmful implications among some proverb-based socialisation practices. These studies support the present finding that language can participate in constructing social identities. However, the present study extends the discussion from gender ideology to ego formation by examining what happens when children internalise the need to defend these identities. The issue is not only that a proverb tells a boy how a man should behave; repeated socialisation may also teach him that failing to perform that identity threatens his status. Similarly, a girl repeatedly exposed to restrictive gender expectations may learn that her social value is tied to a prescribed role (Pokulevska & Shyshov, 2023). Thus, Image Ego may operate through the continuous protection of a socially approved identity.

For egoless pedagogy, the implication is not to discard all expressions concerning strength, responsibility or identity but to critically separate positive values from ego-producing conditions. "*Mtu mume ni kazi*" can be used to teach responsibility, perseverance and contribution while explicitly rejecting the idea that productivity determines human worth (Lema, 2021; Serikkazykyzy & Avakova, 2025; Yakub et al., 2025). "*Mume ni kazi, mke ni nguo*" can become a critical discussion of how language constructs gender roles and why care, work, leadership and responsibility should not be treated as the exclusive property of one sex. The nahau "*Piga moyo konde*" can teach courage while allowing learners to understand that courage includes seeking help, admitting difficulty and learning from others. "*Kuvimba kichwa*" can be used as a reflective expression for discussing how excessive concern with status can prevent learning. The proverb "*Jikaze kiume*" and "*Mwanamume mashine*" can be critically reframed so that strength means responsibility and resilience rather than emotional suppression or refusal to depend on others. In this way, the expressions can become tools for dismantling ego rather than reinforcing it. A child who learns that asking for help is acceptable may become an adult teacher who can learn from students, a

parent who can acknowledge mistakes before children, an employee who can receive feedback from colleagues, and a supervisor who can recognise the knowledge of junior staff. This is the practical contribution of egoless pedagogy: it seeks not merely to prevent ego in children but to interrupt the intergenerational reproduction of ego by changing what children learn about authority, correction, identity and relationships.

Across the three themes, the findings suggest that the pedagogical significance of Swahili proverbs, idioms and sayings lies partly in their capacity to shape dispositions that may extend beyond childhood. Authority Ego concerns how individuals understand power and hierarchy; Defensive Ego concerns how they respond when their competence or self-image is challenged; and Image Ego concerns how they protect socially valued identities. These orientations may become particularly consequential when individuals later occupy roles in which they exercise influence over others. The study therefore proposes that egolessness should be cultivated as a learned relational disposition: children should learn to respect authority without worshipping status, receive correction without defensiveness, and maintain dignity without constructing an image of superiority or invulnerability. The innovative implication of the study is consequently not that Swahili proverbs, idioms and sayings are inherently harmful, but that they constitute a culturally embedded pedagogical resource whose effects depend on how their meanings are selected, interpreted, modelled and reinforced. Critical use of these expressions can preserve cultural knowledge while redirecting it towards humility, mutual learning, openness to correction, cooperation and responsible relationships. In this sense, egoless pedagogy offers a framework for transforming the use of indigenous language from merely transmitting inherited social expectations into deliberately cultivating individuals who can learn from others and, when they later become teachers, parents, employees or leaders, avoid reproducing the very ego-oriented relationships from which they themselves were socialised.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study concludes that Swahili proverbs, idioms and sayings are important pedagogical resources that shape children's perceptions of authority, correction, self-image and relationships. Critical Discourse Analysis identified three interconnected forms of ego construction: Authority Ego, Defensive Ego and Image Ego. Their repeated use may normalise particular social and relational patterns. However, these expressions are not inherently harmful. Guided by Social Learning Theory and Ubuntu Philosophy, their meanings can be critically contextualised to promote egolessness, humility, openness to correction, cooperation and mutual respect. The study proposes culturally responsive egoless pedagogy that transforms indigenous expressions into resources for nurturing responsible, reflective and socially conscious individuals.

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommended the followings;

1. Parents

Proverbs, idioms and sayings in Swahili should be interpreted and contextualised critically by the parents in order to socialise the children. They will highlight the messages that are being intended and look at how some words and phrases might foster superiority, defensiveness or social image consciousness. Parents should encourage children to be humble, ready to be corrected, respectful and cooperative, in their daily relationships. Parents can use these values as models to promote the use of indigenous language resources to become positive tools in promoting children to value others' knowledge, accept guidance and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships in their families and communities.

2. Teachers

The use of culturally responsive Swahili proverbs, idioms and sayings in the classroom should be analysed as part of the teachers' practices to implement egoless pedagogy. They should make students think of the meanings, assumptions and social implications of these phrases. Using the principles of Social Learning Theory and the Ubuntu Philosophy, it is important that the teachers are humble, responsible, and willing to accept feedback and work cooperatively in learning. These activities can contribute to students understanding the value of cultural knowledge and to their ability to think critically, show respect for others, emotional development, and positive ways of making corrections and offering disagreement.

3. Education Policymakers

School education policy makers should integrate egoless pedagogy into teacher education programmes, teacher development programmes and learning policies. These efforts should enable teachers to critically understand and apply indigenous Swahili expressions to foster humility, accountability, cooperation and mutual respect. Training must show how cultural expressions can contribute to positive socialisation, guided by the principles of Social Learning Theory and Ubuntu Philosophy, without perpetuation of harmful power relations or negative self-perceptions. Policymakers should also fund more studies to explore how egoless pedagogy can be put into practice for in different educational and cultural contexts.

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