Proverbs as Theory: Rethinking Children's Participation Rights through Yoruba Epistemologies

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Abstract

Different Models have been created to frame research on children's participation rights, exploring the concept through different lenses. This has been useful in explaining not only how children's participation occurs in different settings but also in shifting the discussion toward how children's participation could become more meaningful. A quest for grounded theories to provide an explanatory framework for this area of children's studies remains. While negotiating the suitability of Childism as a critical theory in my own study, I began to reflect on the similarities between what the theory posits and existing proverbs in my own cultural contexts. This article is a product of this reflection, linking the elements of Childism to some popular proverbs in Yoruba culture, foregrounding Wall's theory in a West African context and highlighting its relevance as an explanatory framework for research in childhood studies. Drawing on my positionality as a researcher from a Yoruba cultural background, I explore how two Yoruba proverbs can be understood as theoretical resources for rethinking children's participation rights. I argue that these proverbs offer conceptual insights into interdependence, relational agency, collective wisdom, and communal responsibility. This article contributes to the literature on how theory is applied in local contexts and expands on how proverbs as theories contribute to understanding children's participation, while positing that indigenous knowledge can help transform how we view, apply, and use theory in social research.

Keywords: *proverbs, theory, children, childism, participation*

Introduction

My engagement with children's participation rights scholarship and broader debates about childhood in Africa has witnessed a recurring tension. In academic discussions, theoretical insights grounded in established scholarly traditions are readily recognised as legitimate contributions to knowledge. Yet what I read about and the reality of what I know

from my cultural Yoruba background seem to differ in terms of how the truth is presented. Proverbs are often treated as cultural illustrations rather than sources of theory. However, within cultural contexts, they frame understandings of children's roles, responsibilities and social significance with similar explanatory power that theories have (Fried, 2020; Martens, 2020). What struck me was not that proverbs are considered culturally meaningful, but that they are rarely considered conceptually meaningful.

I once attended a webinar on decolonising children's rights, centred on an African perspective on studying childhood. This experience prompted me to reflect on a fundamental question: why are some forms of knowledge recognised as theory while others remain confined to the category of culture? What if we do not use indigenous knowledge to illustrate theory but take it at face value, with the explanatory power they provide? This article emerges from these questions. It explores the possibility that Yoruba proverbs can be engaged not simply as expressions of cultural wisdom but as theoretical resources that contribute to contemporary debates about children's participation rights. In doing so, it considers how Yoruba epistemologies may enrich and extend ongoing efforts to decolonise scholarship on childhood and children's rights.

Positionality and Epistemic Location

My positionality shapes this article in important ways. As someone grounded in Yoruba cultural heritage, I grew up with proverbs as part of everyday communication. Proverbs were used to teach, caution, encourage, correct, and transmit values across generations. They were not perceived as ornamental language but as condensed forms of reasoning through which social life was interpreted. Yet my movement between Yoruba cultural spaces and academic environments revealed a striking contrast. Knowledge that carried authority within one context often appeared marginal within another. While theories developed through academic traditions were readily accepted as analytical frameworks, proverbs were more frequently positioned as examples, folklore, or cultural artefacts. This reflexive tension between lived knowledge and academic legitimacy provides the foundation for this article.

I do not approach this discussion as a neutral observer. Rather, I am situated within the epistemic tradition being discussed. I am also a Nigerian and African studying children's participation rights as an international student in a Western country. This positioning creates opportunities as well as responsibilities. It enables me to recognise the conceptual richness of Yoruba proverbs while also remaining attentive to the need for critical engagement, reflexivity, and caution against uncritical celebration of indigenous knowledge systems.

Methodological Reflections: What Does It Mean to Treat Proverbs as Theory?

The reflections above raise important methodological questions. What does it mean to engage proverbs as theory rather than illustration? This could involve moving beyond the practice of citing proverbs merely to support arguments generated elsewhere. Instead, proverbs become conceptual frameworks capable of generating research questions, shaping analysis, challenging assumptions, and offering alternative interpretations of social phenomena. This approach aligns with broader decolonial efforts to recognise multiple sites of knowledge production.

There have been some considerations of the use of proverbs as theory, especially in communication studies (Ehondor 2017; Rogers 1990). Its strength as a tool for generalising concepts is noted to be weak when applied to a whole field, but it has merit in studying subcultures. However, this does not diminish its relevance, since what we know as theoretical foundations are rooted in the indigenous social life of the theorists. Omobowale and Akanle, (2017) noted that the universalism of sociological theories rides on the colonisation of the Majority world, with Western theories serving as a means of understanding the colonies. This universalist positionality in social science disciplines, aimed at a unified understanding of the social world, does more to increase the acceptance of dominant Western ideologies than to recognise the diverse paths to theorising the social world.

Therefore, as a researcher, I consider whether theory must always emerge from conventional academic forms or whether theoretical insight may also be found in oral traditions, cultural practices, and indigenous epistemologies. At the same time, engaging proverbs as theory requires methodological humility. Proverbs do not speak for themselves. They require interpretation, contextualisation, and dialogue with other forms of knowledge. Treating proverbs as theory therefore does not involve rejecting existing scholarship but expanding the range of resources available for theoretical reflection.

Childism, Decoloniality and the Question of Knowledge

I struggled to find a good theory for my study on children's participation rights. First, because of the interdisciplinarity of the field and the unresolved definition of what children's participation really is. One theory that seemed close enough for my direction of study was Wall's Childism. Yet from a decolonial perspective, I also had to deal with the tensions of using a Western-conceived theory, but I justified my choice in the philosophical grounding of the theory. Childism seeks to challenge adultism by reconstructing scholarship, institutions, and social norms in ways that centre children's experiences and perspectives. Wall (2019) argues that Childism provides a critical framework for reimagining social and scholarly

structures through children's standpoints. Biswas (2023) further extends this agenda by advocating for a decolonial Childism that recognises diverse childhoods and multiple traditions of knowledge. My reflection extends these perspectives to consider how proverbs can contribute to the critical framework of understanding children's participation in Africa.

In this article, I argue that Yoruba proverbs contribute to decolonial Childism by functioning as theoretical resources rather than cultural illustrations. While Childism has opened important conversations about children's inclusion, much of its conceptual development remains shaped by Western intellectual traditions. If Childism is to become genuinely decolonial, it must engage seriously with epistemologies that predate and exceed Western academic frameworks. Doing so is not simply to incorporate additional cultural perspectives into existing theories. It involves recognising that knowledge traditions outside dominant academic institutions may themselves generate concepts, frameworks, and modes of explanation capable of informing theory. Yoruba proverbs present one such opportunity.

Proverbs as Theory

Within Yoruba society, proverbs occupy a central place in social and intellectual life. Omobowale et al (2018) describe them as providing contextual understanding for interpreting social relationships and cultural practices. They function as repositories of communal wisdom, ethical guidance, and intergenerational knowledge. Rather than viewing proverbs as literary embellishments, I suggest that they can be understood as theory. Like theories, proverbs are conceptual tools that help communities interpret social life (Ehondor 2017; Omobowale and Akanle 2017). They offer explanations, articulate assumptions about human relationships, define moral expectations, and provide frameworks for understanding social realities. As Malik (2017) argues, proverbs can contribute to theoretical explanation rather than functioning solely as communicative devices.

Approaching proverbs in this way requires a shift in perspective. Instead of treating them as illustrations of ideas developed elsewhere, they become sources of ideas themselves. This article's argument is grounded in two Yoruba proverbs that function as theoretical propositions about interdependence, agency, participation, and communal life.

Interdependence as a Theory of Participation

One proverb states:

Owo omode o to pepe, ti agbalagba o wo keregbe.

(*The child's hand cannot reach the raft; the adult's hand cannot enter the gourd*.)

This proverb offers more than a practical observation. It articulates a theory of relational interdependence. Both children and adults possess capacities and limitations. Neither group can achieve everything independently. Social life is therefore sustained through mutual dependence rather than individual autonomy.

This perspective challenges assumptions frequently embedded in children's rights discourse, in which participation is sometimes framed primarily as children's empowerment, where they have previously been powerless, through advocating for their voice. The proverb instead highlights participation as relational and reciprocal. Children depend on adults, but adults also depend on children. Participation emerges through relationships rather than through isolated acts of individual agency.

Viewed through the lens of Childism, the proverb contributes a relational understanding of childhood that destabilises rigid distinctions between dependence and autonomy. It suggests that recognising children's participation does not require denying interdependence. Rather, participation itself may be grounded in relationships of mutual reliance.

As I reflected on this proverb, I saw a similarity in what it proposes and Wall's (2019) ontology of deep interdependence, which challenges theoretical assumptions often taken for granted within contemporary rights discourse. These assumptions marginalise children, placing them below adults and reflecting children's dependency. What initially appeared as a familiar expression of everyday wisdom increasingly revealed itself as a sophisticated conceptual statement about social organisation within societal structures.

Collective Wisdom and Empowered Inclusion

A second proverb states:

Omode gbon, agba gbon la fi da Ile-Ife.

(*The wisdom of the child and the wisdom of adults together founded Ile-Ife*.)

Ile-Ife occupies a significant place in Yoruba history and cultural memory (Owadugbe 2025). This proverb invokes this symbolic significance to emphasise that community formation depends upon contributions from both children and adults. Importantly, the proverb does not portray children as future contributors whose value lies only in adulthood. Rather, children are already recognised as participants in the foundations of collective life. Their wisdom is presented as necessary to community existence.

This understanding resonates strongly with Childism's aspiration to reconstruct social institutions through children's inclusion. Childism defines a problem of systemic power relations where adults are empowered while children are marginalised. Wall (2019) thus

proposes an element of empowered inclusion in which this systemic bias is addressed, deconstructed, and reconstructed to be more inclusive. Josefsson and Wall (2020) share similar views in portraying how this is connected to issues of global justice where every contribution is recognised, especially with the acknowledgement of marginalised groups including children.

Reflecting on this proverb, I observe a distinctive contribution to debates about children's participation rights. It reframes children's participation as central to community development rather than as one-off events or tokenistic gestures (Hart, 1992; Lundy, 2018; Parkes, 2008). The proverb shows that within the context of Yoruba culture, children's perspectives are not supplementary additions to social life; they are constitutive elements of it.

Reflexivity, Risks and Limitations

This approach of using proverbs as theory is not without limitations. One risk is the romanticisation of indigenous knowledge (Bawaka Country et al., 2019). Yoruba proverbs, like academic theories, emerge from particular historical and social contexts. They may challenge hierarchies in some circumstances while reproducing them in others. For example, some proverbs emphasise children's respect and honour for adults as elders, with little or no room for critique (Omobowale et al., 2018). However, there are others like those in this article which promote children's agency and important contributions to social structures.

Not all proverbs advance children's participation, and some may reinforce generational authority in ways that limit children's agency. Recognising proverbs as theory, especially for the study of children's participation, therefore requires critical engagement. Their value lies not in being superior to Western theories but in their capacity to generate alternative ways of thinking about social life. A decolonial Childism must remain attentive to both the possibilities and limitations of indigenous epistemologies. This has become an important lesson for my own work. The challenge is not simply to elevate indigenous knowledge but to engage it rigorously, reflexively, and critically.

Conclusion

This article began with a personal and scholarly question about why some forms of knowledge are recognised as theory while others are treated as cultural illustration. Through engagement with two Yoruba proverbs, I have argued that proverbs can function as theories, providing explanatory frameworks capable of contributing to children's rights scholarship and decolonial Childism. The proverbs examined here offer conceptual insights into interdependence, relational agency, collective wisdom, and communal responsibility. These

are similar to elements of Wall's Childism theory but grounded in indigenous knowledge and extending insights that deepen understandings of children's participation by locating it within broader networks of social relations and mutual obligation.

Although this reflection is grounded in Yoruba epistemologies, the issues it raises extend beyond West Africa. Recognising proverbs as potential sources of theory invites a broader reconsideration of where knowledge originates and whose concepts shape scholarly debates. For my own research practice, this forms a significant part of my reflection and has reinforced the importance of approaching indigenous knowledge not simply as data to be analysed but as theory capable of informing analysis itself. Such an approach does not displace existing scholarship. Rather, it expands the intellectual resources available for understanding childhood, participation, and social life. In doing so, it contributes to the wider project of building a more plural, reflexive, and genuinely decolonial scholarship of childhood, and by extension the social world.

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