

# Youth Theory in South Africa: An Indigenous African Perspective Derived from Sepedi Idioms and Proverbs

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## Abstract

While there is general underdevelopment of social theory within African scholarship, where the latter tends to rely heavily on borrowing from other scholarships, and in some instances adapt theories developed from elsewhere in a creative manner, notably from Northern scholarly discourses—this does not however, suggest the absence of theory within indigenous African knowledge systems. This article demonstrates, in a constructivist tradition pioneered by African scholars such as Akiwowo and Mafeje that there are rich theoretical and conceptual insights within the indigenous African folklore such as proverbs, poetry, and legends. It is observed that there is elaborate youth theory within South African indigenous communities' cultural heritage and folklore—especially proverbs and idioms. The article discusses such proverbs and idioms in a manner that deciphers their rich theoretical content and insights on young persons as an important social category of African communities, using idioms and proverbs of the Bapedi people of South Africa as examples.

**Keywords:** African; indigenous; proverbs; South Africa; youth theory

## Introduction

The past three decades have witnessed an upsurge in scholarly literature and debates in the Global South (i.e. Africa, South and/or Latin America, as well as Asia), which has critiqued both the perceived but real dominance of imported social scientific theories from the Global North (i.e. Europe and North America). Within this literature and



debates, a concern was not only with the critique of hegemonic Northern theories, but also with the need to develop and promote indigenous and endogenous Global Southern theories as counter-hegemonic and alternative discourses. The problem with Northern theories is that they serve as an extension and the basis for justification of the colonial, imperialist project in the formerly colonised world. The other major pitfall of these theories is the particularistic nature to their contexts of origin and are therefore, irrelevant to realities in the foreign places to which they have been exported. This is contrary to their universalities claim. Thus, a critique of Northern theories assumed a form of both deconstructionism (that relentlessly exposed their conceptual limitations and irrelevance) and constructionism (that sought to break away from hegemonic Northern theories through deliberate advancement of tangible endogenous alternatives from the South).

Key contributors to this debate include, among others, for his critique of imperialist Western social science and his call for a decolonised, endogenous African social science—Ake (1979)(see also Akiwo 1990, 1991; Arowosegbe 2008), for his efforts at advancing indigenous African sociological theories from within Yoruba culture—Mamdani (1997), popular for his critique of African studies—Chakrabarty (2000), popular for his proposition for the need to provincialise Europe—Mafeje (1971, 2001) for advocating for the deconstruction of colonial anthropology—Adesina (2006), for his call for epistemic rapture and the need for sociology with epistemic intent—Alatas (2006a and 2006b) for his critique of Eurocentrism and his call for autonomous traditions—Connell (2007), for his strong argument for Southern theories; as well as Keim (2011), for her idea of counter hegemonic trends in the global South.

This article affirmatively contributes to this discourse but leans more towards the constructionist approach, as I believe that the deconstructionist side of the discourse has been largely exhausted. I firmly believe that our efforts as scholars from the Global South should be geared towards the development and advancement of tangible endogenous alternatives. This would lay a foundation for what I consider a dialogue on an equal basis with our Northern counterparts. I thus concur with Keim (2011)'s observations that notwithstanding her presentation, she found evidence of some counter-hegemonic currents (i.e. some evidence of indigenous and endogenous theories in the Global South). These efforts fall short of providing viable and tangible alternatives. Instead, Keim argues that there is a tendency among scholars in the Global South to play a catch-up game, marked by a reluctance to sever ties with the “international, Northern-dominated mainstream.” Similarly, and earlier Keim (2011) and Mafeje (2001) observed in the 1990s a tendency among African anthropologists to resort to meek efforts to resuscitate the discipline under post-independent conditions, through “development anthropology.” For Mafeje, this and the optimism amongst African anthropologists that such anthropology would give the best expression of indigenous African ethnography and culture amounted to nothing more than a mere reorganisation

rather than deconstruction of colonial anthropology. As Mafeje puts it, "...far from marking a rebirth of anthropology, they sounded like a post-mortem of anthropology as they used to know it before independence" (Mafeje 2001, 16). Mafeje's "they" refers to African anthropologists.

In the sections below, I provide an outline of what sociological theory is and what it entails. This I do with a view to informing my analysis of the Bapedi idioms and proverbs which I argue, have a rich theoretical insights on the youth. I demonstrate this by citing some of the relevant idioms and proverbs. I then end with concluding remarks on indigenous African theory of youth as derived from within these idioms and proverbs, pointing to areas that I believe, require further research towards the advancement of alternative theories in the Global South. I also make remarks on the continued relevance of the contemporary modern era of indigenous African folklores, cultural ethos, social codes and oral art forms, as well as their embedded, yet still to be unearthed theories within them.

## **Sociological Theory in Brief**

Key to every social theory are assumptions about life and society. Wallace and Wolf (1980, 3) assert, that theory, and in particular sociological theory, is about real life situations and experiences, and therefore:

our whole way of looking at the world depends on our theoretical perspective; and to read sociological theory is to understand a great deal more about what we and our world are like and how unordinary, complex, and ambiguous the most taken-for-granted and everyday aspects of our life may be.

This view is consistent with the argument that sociology is concerned with "the development of systematic knowledge about social life, the way it is organised, how it changes, its creation in social action, and its disruption and renewal in social conflict" (Calhoun et al, 2012, 1). Therefore, sociological theory guides sociological inquiry. Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff and Virk (2012) argue further that sociological theory not only guides inquiry towards generating answers to social questions, but also helps the researcher in posing new set of questions (for ongoing debate) under changing circumstances, leading to further inquiries and development in the theory itself for improved knowledge of the social world.

In sociology, and indeed in the broader social sciences theory, it has always been presented as having been pioneered by individual theorists within the contexts in which they live. This point, which is rather strikingly, but not surprisingly shocking, is articulated by the notion and claims that theory has no founding fathers who are black Africans. For instance, Calhoun et al (2012,1), in their observation that theory is rooted in the long history of social thought in the ancient world, only attribute such thought to

Greek philosophers, Roman lawyers, Jewish and Christian religious scholars, and to Muslim societies of Spain, North Africa, and Syria. Strikingly, the rest of black sub-Saharan Africa is excluded as though it has no history of social thought.

Such claims constitute what Sitas (2004) refers to as pervasive Afro-pessimism within a hegemonic post-modern globalisation discourse in which Africa and its people are seen as having no special contribution to make to the world's development. According to Sitas (2004, 16),

within this discourse, there is overwhelming consensus amongst the non-African scholars, centred on the perception of Africa 'as a continent in institutional, mental, economic decline, a cauldron of misery ... as a continent of Islamic fundamentalisms in its north, of amassing chaos and anarchy, and incubator of epidemics and disease, drought and scarcity, coups and genocide, in short, the world's horrific racialised "other"', that '... Africa's prospects are bleak and worsening by the day.

Challenging this discourse, Sitas argues that post-modern discourse's libertarian principles that acknowledge social plurality and difference, which question the Western scientific values and grant theories present opportunities for the “other” and the historically marginalised to make a contribution to the world of knowledge and ideas. He reckons that African social scientists can achieve this by overcoming certain “mental barricades” and by appreciating the value within their unique, dynamic local experiences, as well as the activities of ordinary people, as they creatively and actively engage with their environment (Sitas 2004).

In this article, I argue within the constructivist discourse, which endeavours for the alternative endogenous and indigenous postcolonial African scholarship that rather than theory of society only being driven and led by individual theorists, it is also inspired by and is the outcome of collective, communal life experiences that largely define African communities. This is not only evident in what I am attempting to demonstrate through this article, but also in what other African scholars have and continue to advocate. The late eminent Nigerian sociologist Akiwowo (1990) for instance, found within the poems of the Yoruba society in Nigeria, rich ontological principles and wisdom, from which he identified sociological propositions. Similarly Makgoba, Shope, and Mazwai (1999, xi), in their introduction of the edited volume titled *African Renaissance* assert that “language is not simply a means of communication or expression, but a corpus of knowledge of a people.” These scholars further asserts that “language is culture and in language we carry our identity and our culture. Through language we carry science and technology, education, political systems and economic developments.”

Arguing along similar lines, I demonstrate that there is a relevant sociological theory on young people embedded in the language (specifically idioms and proverbs) of the

Bapedi of South Africa. Idioms and proverbs embedded in the Sepedi language<sup>1</sup>, as Nokaneng correctly points out, are about the “wisdom, the jokes, and careful observations of the Sotho people, and are about or speak to the real world in which we live ...” (Nokaneng nd, 177).

This view is shared by other Africanist scholars as cited by Mhlambi (2012b, 26), according to whom proverbs are “witticisms, truisms and maxims that have accrued over generations to explain certain phenomenon in the life experiences of a people”, and that they are not only “artistic utterances but also are instructive sites on knowledge, wisdom, philosophy, ethics and morals.”

I thus concur with what Mhlambi (2012b, 3) refers to as a modern popular arts paradigm, which, unlike other approaches that consider tradition as being in a state of disintegration and in need of preservation, “privileges a focus which emphasises how this disintegration is re-invoked and continuously re-inscribed by the masses in modern times.” The modern popular arts paradigm, Mhlambi (2012b, 20) argues and promotes a re-generation of folklore (i.e. indigenous oral texts) and its significance in contemporary society, thus rejecting “conventional conceptions of folklore as “antediluvian”, “backward”, “illiterate” and “primitive.” Proverbs, Mhlambi argues, like axioms, have strong elements of fluidity and flexibility that allow the incorporation of newness and freshness, thus enabling them to comment on the evolving trends of the contemporary world. Such relevance of indigenous African folklore, Mhlambi (2016) demonstrates in her other text, through reference to and analysis of the opera performance known as “Winnie”, which has as its key subject South Africa’s prominent political figure, the late Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. Mhlambi found that this opera deploys isiXhosa language and indigenous codes (including idioms) to create an Africanist worldview and discourse that claim and reshape the interpretation of Madikizela-Mandela as the main subject. The indigenous codes, she argues, “signal to audiences familiar flavours that are crucial for the interpretation of the sophistication of African aesthetics at play in the structural makeup of the opera, even when the opera medium itself is so foreign” (Mhlambi 2016, 49). They also help to “...re-contextualise them (the aesthetics) within the greater political events that dictated her (Madikizela-Mandela’s) actions...against an array of political mishaps besetting the post-1994 administration of the country” (Mhlambi 2016, 49).

The relevance of indigenous African folklore in the contemporary era is further evident in what Mhlambi observes to be a shift in the late 1990s within corporate South Africa

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1 Sepedi is one of the nine indigenous African languages in South Africa spoken mainly amongst the Bapedi ethnic group in the present-day Limpopo province. Bapedi have unique, and yet in some cases shared, cultural traditions and customs with other indigenous African ethnic groups in Southern Africa

from the use of historically dominant languages (English and Afrikaans) in mobile technology for social connectivity, towards an increased use of isiZulu. In so doing, the corporates, especially those selling insurance policies and related products, were able to (Mhlambi, 2012a, 129):

...exploit certain marginal cultural notions – related to life, death and spirituality, for the improved penetration of remote and initially excluded markets and for the maintenance of a brand presence even if it is outside mainstream advertising space.

This observed flexibility, fluidity and ability of African art forms and folklore to improvise attest to what was observed by researchers in earlier studies as resilience of the ubuntu/*botho* value system and other indigenous African customs, which had survived the harsh and repressive historical colonial and apartheid conditions (Mapadimeng 2009; Ngubane 1963, 1979; Nzimande 1988).

Without doubt therefore, the indigenous African cultural value systems and folklore (including proverbs and idioms as artistic oral forms of expression) and the theories embedded within them, continue to be relevant to the contemporary world, defined by a complex mix of processes of globalisation, glocalisation, creolisation and diversity (Giddens 2013; Iyall Smith 2013; Pieterse 2013). In the section below, I present and cite a few selected Sepedi idioms and proverbs about young people and discuss their meanings and what I consider to be the theory of youth within them.

## **Indigenous African Idioms and Proverbs within Sepedi**

Informed and located within the context of the foregoing post-independent African social sciences, critique of Afro-pessimism and accounts on language and therefore culture-embedded knowledge; this section presents a set of proverbs and idioms within Sepedi, and examine their theoretical content on the youth. One set of idioms and proverbs within Sepedi is that which seeks to explain and describe the nature of young people, and how they should relate with, and be treated by their elderly counterparts. Note here the following idioms:

*Etetša serathana pele, bosasa se tla go etetša*

Basically, this idiom encourages parents and elders to nurture and mentor the young, so that they grow into adults, as they may in turn, take good care of them in their old age, as well as provide leadership. It is about reciprocity anchored in the *ubuntu/botho*

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2 According to Jordan K. Ngubane (1963) *ubuntu/botho* is a philosophy of life and the practice of being humane, which gave content to life for African people long before the arrival of white settlers, and rests on the supreme ethical code, which attaches primacy to human personality as a sacred being. Further attempts at defining the concepts include those by

cultural principles and values that promote solidarity and reciprocity (Kamwangamalu 1999, Mapadimeng 2007, 29; Mbigi and Maree 1995; Prinsloo 1998).

*A phsya a šuela madibana*

This is another idiom that serves as recognition of the inevitable in life. It uses a metaphor and analogy of water wells, to articulate that the old wells shall dry up, giving way to, or would be substituted by new ones. This idiom is used or cited to remind people that today's active and leading elders are bound to reach a point of fatigue as a result of ageing, and would therefore, have to retire when the time comes and hand over the baton to the young ones as future leaders and active citizens. This expression reminds members of society that there is a need to plan well and in advance for succession in order to adequately prepare young people to become responsible future elders and leaders at various levels, ranging from household to community level.

Other idioms with similar meanings include the ones listed below. They point to the significance and the need for elders to transmit crucial values and knowledge to the youth (i.e. train and mentor them), in order not only to ensure continuity but also to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge for them to be able to continue with life in a self-reliant manner.

*Tloga-tloga e tloga kgole, modiša wa kgomo o tšwa nayo šakeng!*

*Thutela-bogolo e a roba/e boima le Mohlare o kobja o sa le o monana!*

(The rough English equivalent is “strike the iron while still hot”).

This understanding of young people is based on the view and the belief that the young are well positioned and suited to take over from their elders and uphold the heritage and the legacies of the past, and are therefore, logically expected to fulfill their duties as heirs to their elders. This is clearly represented in the idioms cited below:

*Mmala wa kgomo o namaneng*

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Mbigi and Maree, according to whom ubuntu is a “metaphor that describes the significance of group solidarity on survival issues in African communities that are subjected to poverty, as a result of deprivation, and which is effected through brotherly group care as opposed to individual self-reliance” (Mbigi and Maree 1995, 4). Its core defining values are respect, group solidarity, conformity, compassion, human dignity and humaneness, collective unity and solidarity, sharing, communalism, interdependence, universal brotherhood and hospitality (Kamwangamalu 1999, 25–26; Mdluli 1987, 66–71; Mbigi and Maree 1995, 2). Kamwangamalu 1999, 25–26).

(Direct English translation: “a cow’s colour is found in her calf”).

*Kgaka kgolo ga ena mabala, mabala a kgakaneng*

(Direct English translation: “an adult guinea fowl has no colours as colours are only found in her chicks”).

*Mo thlako ya pele e gatilego le ya morago e a gata*

(An English equivalent: “following in the footsteps of our ancestors”).

These proverbs and idioms also point to mutual dependence between the young and the old. The main conceptual category here is age, through which the roles and responsibilities of adults and elders in their interactions with the young are presumed. This is based on an understanding and assumption that young people have to serve as future leaders, taking over from the elderly.

The practical implications of these conceptions of youth are expressed and represented through unique social and traditional institutions that define indigenous African communities. Such institutions are absent in non-African societies. Perhaps a notable example of such institutions is that of old age homes. Just as elders are expected to look after the young, the latter too are expected to do the same once the parents have grown old. Once again, this points to the *ubuntu* principle of reciprocity in action. Even to this day institutions such as old age homes are not popular within African communities and are only used by few Africans, mainly middle-class citizens living in urban centres.

Social institutions that are consistent with the theory of youth as outlined above include *koma* (“initiation school”)—an institution that facilitates the rites of passage to adulthood. It is during the *koma* that communal values and norms are transmitted to the initiates. These norms are transmitted by the older generation to the younger generation. Through this institution, young men and women are groomed and trained to assume adult responsibilities through the use of artistic forms such as music or songs and poetry (*dikoša le direto tša koma*), daily work activities, which define the division of labour between men and women within the community—through humour, as well as the performance of cultural rituals (known as *go digela or ditigelo*).

Another social institution, through which these values and norms are transmitted, is the household or extended family; characterised by intimate relationships between the young and the elderly (not just mothers and fathers but also grandfathers, grandmothers, aunts, uncles and cousins). This remains so despite the reported changes in household and family structures and patterns marked by growth in Western-type nuclear family pattern among black African people, especially in urban areas (Ziehl 2001). The reported changes, the impact of which still needs to be carefully examined and



determined through further empirical studies were also attributed to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which claimed many lives in South Africa during the 1990s, resulting in child-headed households. Also considered as the contributing factors to changes in household and family structures are social ills such as the abuse of drugs, domestic violence, as well as the post-apartheid educational and economic opportunities that were presented and upheld through redress policies of social equity, affirmative action and black economic empowerment. These have seen a phenomenal rise in the black middle classes, including black women, further leading to financial independence and growing individualism amongst these social categories, and the resultant trend towards nuclear family and single-parent family structures.

Some idioms on young people, such as the example cited below emphasise the importance of a common social identity (be it at clan, peer, village community, ethnic, or national level). An example here is the idiom *Bana ba kgwale ba tsebana/ba bitšana ka melodi* (English translation: “grouse chicks identify with each other through sound”). This finds expression in traditional social practices associated with *koma*, such as *mephatho*. These refer to what in English may be referred to as regiments of those who serve in the same event or practice. In this specific case, *mphatho* would refer to a regiment of young men and women who went to *koma* (“initiation school”) in the same year and season (and falling within the same age bracket), and are given a common *mphatho* (the name of the regiment). Examples of the names of such regiments (“*mephatho*”) are *Matuku*, *Matjedi*, *Maswene*, and *Magasa*. Such cultural and social identities are in similar line with other African clan-based identities that take the form of totems such as *Bakone* (whose totem is a bird known as *thlanthlagane*), *Batau* (whose totem is a lion), *Bakwena* (whose totem is a crocodile), *Bahurutse* (whose totem is a baboon), *babina phiri* or *aboSompisi* in isiZulu (whose totem is a hyena), and *babina nare* (whose totem is a buffalo).

Indigenous African idioms and proverbs also presume some negatives. African communities do recognise that no matter how hard the elders may work to transmit positive values and skills to young people, the latter may still disappoint and become deviant. This is captured in the two proverbs cited below:

*Kgomo ka mogobe e wetšwa ke namane.*

*Kgomo e maswi ga ye itswale.*

(While the metaphor is that of a milk-producing cow, the idiom, when translated means that sometimes a cow that produces much milk could produce another one with lesser milk—in reality this metaphor is used as reference to humanity, whereby hard working and dedicated parents may give birth to rather lazy, non-diligent child or children, who may as a result, not even carry forth their legacy of hard work and diligence).

## Conclusion

The indigenous African theory of young people asserts that a mutually dependent and beneficial relationship between the young and the elderly is determined by efforts from both parties to fulfill their respective duties and responsibilities within society. Specifically, the elders need to guide young people and transmit values and principles of life to young people in order that the latter are adequately prepared and equipped to take over future leadership responsibilities at various levels within society (beginning at the household level as a form of private sphere right up to the public sphere—for example community level or national level institutions). Thus, the relationship between the elderly and the young should be defined as high levels of cooperation and willingness to fulfill their respective duties and responsibilities. Such an interaction and learning process however, requires appropriate supportive social institutions through which values and principles of life could be exchanged and transmitted. Institutions such as *koma* and families with extended family relations have always assumed such a supportive role. The assumption within this theory is that these mutually dependent relationships would contribute positively to grooming future leaders among the youth, ensuring continuity and development grounded in tried and tested traditions.

This indigenous African theory of youth does however, and as noticed from some of the cited idioms and proverbs, acknowledge possibilities of deviation by some young people from some of the established traditions and practices, which could in turn, undermine the positive outcomes derived from such mutually-beneficial relationships with the elderly. The question this gives rise to is, (and which this article has not addressed as it falls outside of its immediate scope): *what is the extent of such deviation and what effect has it had on mutual relations between the young and the old?* Phrased differently, the question would be: *have the traditional mutual relations between the youth and the elderly folks as represented in the idioms and proverbs remained intact and unchanged?* If they have changed, what brought about such change? *And what are implications for the theory explicated in this article and its relevance?* These and the related questions could not be any more relevant than in the present context of globalised world, wherein external influences, mainly from the economically and politically- dominant Western or Northern nations are said to be altering traditional practices in the historically-colonised parts of the world. The discourse on globalisation also reveals local forces of resistance to blanket obliteration of traditions and cultural practices in the Global South, aptly captured through the concept of localisation. Such resistance results in the amalgamation described as glocalisation and/or hybridisation (Giddens 2013; Iyall Smith 2013; and Pieterse 2013). As was observed from the earlier review of the post-independent deconstructionist discourses, while some progress was made towards advancing alternatives, this has not however, reached sufficiently convincing levels that put the Global South on an equal footing with the Global North.

It was also observed in this study that within the indigenous African theory of youth are related concepts of age, communalism, mutuality, reciprocity, respect, solidarity, and deviance. These concepts explain the importance of yet another concept—that is; that of social cohesion within society and achievable through the fostering of a common identity and promotion of collective goals. These concepts also help to explain how social cohesion could be disrupted (by either internal factors such as failure of exemplary leadership on the part of the elderly or the collapse and/or weakening of institutions that support historical and traditional mutual relations between the youth and the elderly; or by external factors such as the domineering influence of foreign values. Notwithstanding this possibility, it was also observed that indigenous African value systems and folklores (including oral art forms such as proverbs and idioms) have historically displayed levels of resilience that enabled them to outlive adverse, invasive colonial and apartheid conditions, which sought to systematically obliterate them and their relevance (Mapadimeng 2009; Ngubane 1963, 1979; Nzimande 1988). This resonates with Mhlambi's (2012b, 30) observation that deviations and threats are countered through narratives that reiterate proverbs as caution against acceptance of modern trends, which pose a threat to indigenous African cultural ethos and social codes that promote social cohesion attained by the older generations.

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