

Chapter 4

Proverbs and Child Protection: A Case Study of Three Bantu Languages: Luganda, Lusoga and Runyankole

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4.1 Introduction

Following the enactment of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and its subsequent adoption worldwide, child protection has taken center stage in childhood studies. The CRC spurred a plethora of actions enshrined in legislative and policy frameworks at the national level emphasizing the promotion and protection of child rights as well as prevention of their violations. There is evidence to show that different communities have culturally-embedded resources for child protection enshrined in child-rearing practices, parenting rules, communication and collective social commitments. However, such cultural resources have not been given much attention in child protection programming for both protection and prevention of abuse. The use of proverbs in communication is an integral aspect of culture that conveys messages with the potential for promoting and protecting child rights at the family and community level. However, the use of some proverbs

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may also provoke attitudes, values and practices that predispose children to an array of rights violations, including exposure to violence.

Proverbs are a constituent part of language. Language is an “institution which is all embracing, other aspects of society are subsumed in it. Such aspects include culture, art of communication etcetera” (Okon and Ansa 2012: 312). Language is not only a principal vehicle for the transmission of cultural knowledge but also a primary means by which we gain access to the contents of others’ minds. It provides a medium through which individual responses are elicited and responded to (Krauss and Chiu 1997). Through language, individuals name and give meaning to aspects of experience. Individuals are even able to create situations and objects (Keating 2005).

Proverbs are complex, intriguing, and important phrases, statements or words that have hidden meanings. They serve to convey particular messages indirectly in a specific context. When told, the speaker and hearer arrive at the same meaning (Honeck 1997; Mollanazar 2001). As vehicles of culture they “express well known truths, social norms, or moral concerns” (Gibbs and Beitel 1995: 134). Proverbs have also been described as carefully crafted statements of wisdom that provide an understanding of situations, guide context specific judgments and suggest a course of action for similar or related situations occurring (Taylor 1965; also see Mieder, 2006). They could be factual or metaphorical and could consist of at least one topic and one comment about that topic. They could have as few as two words (Mieder 2006).

Proverbs serve both literal and practical functions. Their literal function is manifested in leisurely discourse (Dabaghi et al. 2010). Proverbs are used in prose, poetry, and song. In contrast their practical function is manifested in practical situations (Honeck 1997). They can be used in every aspect of the discussion to address situations (Dabaghi et al. 2010).

Proverbs serve individuals well in oral speech and written word and are a significant rhetorical force in the oral and written modes of communication. When a proverb is chosen for a particular situation it becomes an effective strategy of communication (Mieder 2004). It is a neutral mechanism for disseminating information, influencing and advocating behavior, and sending clear messages about what is right or wrong. They enable the speaker to approach delicate or sensitive subjects that one might be uncomfortable addressing directly. They enable one to pass on information in a simple, easily understood and acceptable way (White et al. 2002).

Proverbs deal with issues that border on the values, norms, institutions and artifacts of a society across the whole gamut of the people’s experiences. They are crucial in reconstruction of experiences, explaining and reasoning about the past, giving instructions and warnings for the future, and encouraging or amusing each other (Odeunmi 2008). In some instances, a proverb may serve as a piece of advice concerning a recommended direction of action, although it is not literally a piece of advice. At other times, proverbs serve as tools to cover individual opinions in public interactive situations (Lauhakangas 2007).

Despite their usefulness, proverbs have been given scanty attention with regard to their child protection potential. Child protection means “preventing and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse against children including commercial sexual exploitation, trafficking, child labour and harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage” (UNICEF 2006: 1).

Child protection promotes, protects and fulfills children's rights to protection from abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence as expressed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights, humanitarian and refugee treaties and conventions, as well as national laws (Save the Children 2007).

In Africa and Uganda in particular, proverbs are a central mechanism of communication and are used to relay and emphasize cultural values in various fora. Proverbs communicate messages, beliefs and norms that may positively or negatively influence child protection. Drawing on examples from three Bantu ethnic communities in Uganda (the Baganda, the Basoga and the Ankole), this paper systematically analyses the contextual use of proverbs in communication to analyze their meanings and implications for child protection in Uganda.

4.2 Methods

This article is based on research conducted on proverbs in three Bantu ethnic communities in Uganda – Buganda, Busoga and Ankole. The Buganda community occupies most of the central region in the north and western sides of Lake Victoria. Luganda is the traditional language of Buganda community. The people from Buganda community are referred to as 'the Baganda people'. The Busoga community occupies the mid-central region from the eastern banks of River Nile. Lusoga is the traditional language of Busoga community. The people from Busoga community are referred to as 'the Basoga people'. The third group are from the Ankole community located in the southwestern part of Uganda. Runyankole is the traditional language of Ankole community. The people from Ankole community are referred to as 'the Banyankole people'. While each language stated is a traditional language ascribed to a specific community described above, it is common to find multilingual people who speak two or all three of those languages. Data was collected through in-depth and key informant interviews and document review. Research was conducted between February 2012 and October 2013. Study participants included cultural leaders, elders and parents. Elders and cultural leaders were purposively included based on their presumed experience and knowledge about their culture, its linguistic dynamics and traditional cultural practices on child protection. Selection of parents was based on presumed knowledge about contemporary methods of child protection and how they complement or contradict the culturally embedded ones.

In depth and key informant interviews were conducted with cultural leaders, elders and selected parents. Unstructured research instruments were used in conducting the interviews. Data collection also involved a review of documents particularly related to each community regarding culture, language and use of proverbs.

The paper used analytical tools drawn from the cultural approach to development. The main thrust of the cultural approach is to identify both cultural resources and cultural constraints to different aspects of social development and work to promote the positive cultural resources and to engage communities to change the harmful cultural norms.

Upon analysis, we found that it was not possible to have an equal number of proverbs from each language or cultural group that communicate about the same theme. We, therefore, do not present an equal number of proverbs from the various ethnic groups on each of the themes.

For all interviews, informed consent was sought from study participants through prior explanation of the study purpose and scope. Information obtained was stripped of any identifying information especially names of the study participants. It was only accessible to the members of the research team.

4.3 Results

4.3.1 Proverbs Related to Child Protection

The findings show that the communities have closely related proverbs, some of which directly or indirectly relate to child protection and child abuse at the family and community levels. For systematic presentation and discussion, we have categorized proverbs into those related to: collective efforts towards child care; family as the key unit of child care; adequacy and timelines of support; respect for children and childhood; gender-responsive child care; child's right to consent; child labor; and discrimination.

4.3.1.1 Proverbs on Collective Efforts Towards Child Care

Across the study communities, we found proverbs that advocate for collective efforts for child care provision at the family and the community levels. These proverbs allude to child care and protection as a responsibility for each member of the community. Advocacy for communal responsibility for child care and protection provides grounds for the community to act as an informal social security system for the children especially those in difficult circumstances. Most of these resonate with literature which underlines the need to embed responsibility for child protection within the fabric of community life and creating a system of shared responsibility and mutual support (UNICEF 2010).

Examples of such proverbs are provided in the text box below.

Abaryakamwe tibabura kusiga akokurya k'omwana (literally translated as 'people who share food (friends), cannot fail to spare some for each other's children') – Runyankole proverb, Ankole community.

Akuweera omwana akira nakwagadde (literally translated as 'one who gives [something to] your child is better than one who just says he or she loves you') – Luganda proverb, Buganda community.

The Runyankole proverb alludes to mutual responsibility over children in the community. On the other hand, the Luganda proverb means, that for effective child care and support, actions weigh much more than words and mere statements. Without concrete actions to promote the welfare of the child, protection can only be rhetoric. These proverbs frown upon people and institutions in the community that give issues of child protection lip service without tangible commitments like enacting and implementing pro-child protection laws, providing basic needs like food and shelter, and meeting strategic needs such as education.

Quite related to the above, some proverbs were found to be advocating for community participation in child upbringing irrespective of the children's parenthood. This, however, was mainly found in Runyankole language.

Orega omwana ahari ishe, amwongyera obutesi (literally translated as 'he who reports a child to its father only adds to its spoiling.')– Runyankole proverb, Ankole community.

This proverb obligates community members to keenly observe and collectively correct children when they misbehave in their community and provide a true report of the children's condition or behavior to parents or relatives. This may serve as an early warning system to the parents or guardians to act in time to protect or counsel the child. In such circumstances however, it is important that the parent seeks the child's account of events.

4.3.1.2 Proverbs Emphasizing Protective Family Care

Apart from the emphasis on community responsibility over children, some proverbs underline the centrality of a caring and protective family. The family is considered the most important unit of protection against abuse, exploitation, negligence and violence. In line with the UNCRC, the Bantu cultures maintain that a nurturing family environment provides the best environment for the growth and wellbeing of the child. Family provides for and secures for the child their rights to safety, wellbeing, dignity and development. It is a unit that facilitates actual involvement in a child's life. It provides ground to share experiences, which could make the child knowledgeable of issues to do with abuse, exploitation, negligence and violence. Family is thus viewed as a form of security in terms of identity, belonging, health, education, and formal or official registration of a child with respect to birth, citizenship,

clan, lineage, etc. Family is also considered as security against any potential hostile environment that the child may interface with. The proverbs below demonstrated that the family is an important unit of child protection.

Akaana k'owaabo kashwera n'ebinyoro (literally translated as 'a child at home, feels protected and bold') – Runyankole proverb, Ankole community.

Ssekkono tawanyisibwa (literally translated as 'you cannot switch your hands with those of somebody else') – Luganda proverb, Buganda community.

Nanyini mufu y'akwata awawunya (literally translated as 'the owners of the dead body or corpse is the one who handles its parts that have bad odor') – Luganda proverb, Buganda community.

Agali Awamu gegaluma ennyama (literally translates as 'when all teeth are firmly fixed in the gums they are ably used to chew meat') – Luganda proverb, Buganda community.

The Runyankole proverb emphasizes the primacy of the family in child care and protection. The first and second Luganda proverbs mean that one cannot abdicate his/her responsibility expecting someone else to take it up. In the Buganda community, where Luganda is their traditional language, the family is the primary unit for child care and upbringing; therefore, a family cannot be switched with something else. Much as collectivistic contexts treasured by the Buganda culture call for community responsibility in childcare and protection, the norms and values related to child care compel the family to provide the primary leadership with support from the relatives, neighbors and friends. The third Luganda proverb advises that when a family is united, it can raise its children better.

Furthermore, in this study, we found that there were proverbs that could be chosen in situations where someone is communicating on the mandate of the family, leading the process of effective monitoring of children in a bid to create a safe environment and space for child growth and development. In the Bantu culture, effective monitoring of a child is primarily a responsibility of the nuclear and extended family and is perceived as an essential aspect of child protection. Monitoring of children ideally enables detection of existing or potential abuse, exploitation, negligence and

violence against them. In a way vulnerability and safe spaces are identified. From this perspective, one may argue that effective monitoring of children contributes to the child's emotional, social, cognitive and physical development.

Akaana k'omururu tokeziikira (literally translated as 'if you have a greedy child, you cannot be sure that you will attend its burial') – Runyankole proverb, Ankole community.

Omuto mbuzi erundwa wakamwa (literally translated as 'a child is like a goat, the one looking after it (the child) must speak out') – Luganda proverb, Buganda community.

Ennundo elya kyatule (literally translated as 'the harmer can be identified by the noise it makes') – Lusoga proverb, Busoga community.

Both the Runyankole and Luganda proverbs apply to situations where the parents need to monitor and advise children on how to avoid trouble as they deal with new situations in life. The Lusoga proverb explains that a child would only hear what he/she is told. In other words, parents shoulder the blame if they do not counsel or speak to children and the children get into trouble. This proverb encourages parents to observe, monitor and advise their children on appropriate cultural behavior.

4.3.1.3 Proverbs Emphasizing Adequacy and Timeliness of Support

A number of proverbs were found to advocate for adequacy and timeliness of support offered to children. Caretakers are urged to provide sufficient support which could ably satisfy the need/s of the child. Such proverbs are in line with Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child (1989), which states that every child has a right to a standard of living adequate for its mental, spiritual, moral and social development. Other than emphasize on adequacy of support, proverbs also put into context the aspect of timeliness in supporting children. Parents and other caretakers are advised to always provide material, psychological and/or financial support in a timely manner. It is argued that if support is provided late, it may be too late to be of use. Examples of such proverbs are given below.

Emikono mikye eyaka omwana ehuuki (literally translated as 'having few hands denies a child clout') – Runyankole proverb, Ankole community.

Abalwa okulamba balamba no'webirevu (literally translated as 'people who take too long to counsel their children, eventually counsel someone with a beard') – Lusoga Proverb, Busoga community.

Linda kiggweyo afumita mukira (literally translated as 'if you wait for the end you will only pierce the tail') – Luganda proverb, Buganda community.

The Runyankole proverb means that when children do not get enough support and help, they may fail to achieve their dreams. It obligates parents to fulfill their responsibility of providing for their children's practical and strategic needs but also expose their children to other 'parents' in the community who may contribute to their well-being in future. The Lusoga proverb makes it a normative expectation on parents to always advise children at the right time and not wait until it is too late. Similarly, the Luganda proverb is used to encourage parents and community members to provide timely support to children. This proverb is often used to encourage mothers to provide timely advice particularly to the girl-child regarding adolescent sexual and reproductive health issues to counter possible early sex or pregnancy and the associated consequences. It could also be used when calling upon parents to always guide their children to do the right things when they are still young. Guiding them as adults would be too late.

4.3.1.4 Respect for Children and Childhood

A number of proverbs were found to promote respect to children and childhood. The family and the community as social institutions are guided through these proverbs to accord children space and respect irrespective of age and sex. Respect for children is broad and cross-cutting through all child rights such as the right for privacy, honor and reputation, right to life, right to registration, right to an identity and others. The call made by these proverbs is in line with Article 2 paragraph 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which calls on state parties to respect and ensure that the rights set forth in the convention are met for each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind. Respect for children and childhood also calls on parents to promote children's own decision-making, and respect for choices made, as long as decisions and choices made do not threaten their own rights. In the end, this promotes practices where the best interest of the child is put at the forefront.

Akutumira omwana omuto akureeba amagezi (literally translated as 'someone who sends a child to you is only testing your intelligence') – Lusoga proverb, Busoga community.

Togaya kyama kya muto (literally translated as ‘never underestimate a child secret’) – Luganda proverb, Buganda community.

Emiti emito gyegigumizza ekibira (literally translated as ‘the young tree plants make the forest thick’) – Luganda proverb, Buganda community.

Akaliku eibeere tikeeteka kyama (literally translated as ‘an adolescent girl should hardly accept to be called for a secret’) —Lusoga proverb, Busoga community.

The Runyankole proverb means that the intelligence of adults is gauged by how they value and treat young children. Both the Runyankole and Lusoga proverbs mean that respect should not only be accorded to elders but also to the children and suggests that parents should listen to their children. On the other hand, the first Luganda proverb means that there is need to respect a child’s advice or decision on any matter. This is also significant in recognizing children’s voices in influencing decisions that affect them and their environments. The third proverb calls on elders to have great respect for children as they are the future.

Some proverbs, however, recognize that often people do not respect child rights and caution children and their parents to always be observant of the people who interact with children and where such interactions happen. Ideally any interactions with the child are supposed to be held in an open environment where one cannot engage in acts of violence, exploitation and abuse of the child. For example, the Lusoga proverb: ‘*Akaliku eibeere tikeeteka kyama*’, cited in the box above means that adolescent girls should be suspicious of such invitations for purposes of protection against abuse.

4.3.1.5 Gender Responsive Child Care

Particular proverbs were found to argue for recognition of the difference in physical, psychological and emotional development for both the boy and girl child. This is a pointer to the existence of gender inequalities within the community which brings out the need for caretakers to engage in affirmative action. Such recognition of differences is a good practice as boys and girls have different weaknesses and strengths, which in the end presents varying needs among boys and girls. This also implies that the vulnerabilities that affect the boy-child could differ from what affects the girl-child. Caretakers should thus be able to recognize and respond effectively to the differences and the subsequent vulnerabilities and needs that emerge with

these differences. Good examples of such proverbs were found in the Basoga and Baganda communities:

‘Akomuwala tekada kukamulenzi’ (literally translated as “a girl should not be treated as secondary or lower status to that of the boy”) — Luganda proverb, Buganda community.

‘Ak’omughala tikaira kukamulenzi’. (literally translated as “a girl should not be treated as secondary or lower status to that of the boy”)—Lusoga proverb, Busoga community.

The two proverbs simply say that both male and female children should be treated equally. They also have another implicit meaning that demonstrates that boys and girls are unique in many ways that must be respected.

4.3.1.6 Child’s Right to Consent

Some proverbs could be chosen to influence and advocate for a child’s right to consent. Often people do not respect the child’s right to consent when arriving at decisions that affect them. Proverbs could be used to send a clear message that people with a parental responsibility to make decisions on behalf of the child act in their own interests, rather than acting in the best interest of the child. At times, such persons do not fully inform children on all information relevant to the activity to which consent is being sought, thus children are manipulated into making decisions that are not in their favor. At other times, even those children that have come of age are not given the chance to consent to decisions made about their lives. Disregarding child consent provides ground for abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence towards the child. The proverbs that inform on violation of child consent include:

Babyeta eby’abaana, bireetera banyinabo amabondo (literally means that ‘eats donated to children make their mothers’ stomachs grow big’), – Runyankole proverb, Ankole community.

Abato babalanga buto (literally translated as ‘children are accused on account of being young’) – Lusoga proverb, Busoga community.

N'omuto akuba engoma omukulu n'ozina (literally translated as 'even the young child drums and an adult dances') – Luganda proverb, Buganda community.

N'omuto akuba engoma omukulu yaakina, (literally translated as 'even the young child drums and an adult dances') – Lusoga proverb

The Runyankole proverb ridicules parents who take advantage of things that belong to children and utilize them without the children's consent. The Lusoga proverb could be used in situations where people have a belief that children can never be right before their elders and they are simply supposed to obey. The Luganda proverb and the last Lusoga proverb could be chosen in situations where one wants to send a clear message on respecting the views of young children.

4.3.1.7 Proverbs Against Child Labor

Other proverbs were found to inform caretakers on the possibility for their children to voluntarily engage in child labor activities. Often communities define the various responsibilities of a child, and these are often tailored according to gender. Labor-related activities that constitute these responsibilities could, however, be tantamount to child labor. In other cases, often children from households where caretakers hardly meet their needs engage in activities that could also be viewed as child labor. The International Labor Organization (ILO) (2013) acknowledges that not all work done by children could be classified as child labor. Work that does not affect their health and personal development or interfere with their schooling is regarded as positive. However, if the kind of work the child engages in deprives him or her of his or her childhood, potential and dignity and is harmful to physical and mental development, then this amounts to child labor (International Labor Organization 2013). Thus, these proverbs inform caretakers of such possibilities and, in a way, require them to always reflect on the kind of labor-related activities children engage into.

There are several proverbs that inform caretakers on the possibility for their children to voluntarily engage in child labor activities for example:

Eka ebaagire etumira omwana busha (literally translated as 'a home where an animal has been slaughtered will send a child on an errand without paying for his service') –Runyankole proverb, Ankole community.

Kalibakasajja, akuliisa engo (literally translated as ‘children praised for bravery and ability to do things that adults do may end up overstretching themselves and or lose their lives’) – Luganda proverb, Buganda community.

Omumpi wakoma wakwata (literally translated as ‘a short person can only reach where his/her height enables’) – Luganda proverb, Buganda community.

The Runyankole proverb points out that someone may take advantage of a child by using him/her for some work and rewarding them with non-material, insignificant items. The first Luganda proverb draws on the fact that attempting to equate children to adults may expose them to exploitative and risky activities inappropriate for their age. The last proverb means that children should at all times be given tasks that fit their abilities.

4.3.1.8 Protection Against Discrimination

Certain proverbs inform and caution on existing discriminatory tendencies within families towards children. It is pointed out that often caretakers discriminate against children based on their ability, gender, age, physical characteristics, and relation to caretakers, among others. The implication is that there will be differences in access to needs like health, clothing, and education, which could harm the child both physically and emotionally. Also such a practice undermines the human worth and dignity of the child as children are made to feel isolated and alienated. The proverbs that inform and caution on existing discriminatory tendencies are:

Omwana mukuru n’otari waawe (literally translated as ‘you can treat a child as an adult only if it is not your own’) – Runyankole proverb, Ankole community.

Atamuzadde amutikka jjinja (literally translated as ‘one who is not a parent to the child makes him/her to carry a stone’) – Luganda proverb, Buganda community.

Atali inhoko akwidhukira mamala kulya (literally translated as ‘one who is not your real mother will only remember you after she has eaten’) – Lusoga proverb, Busoga community.

The above proverbs point to the potential exploitation or mistreatment of children by their non-biological parents/caretakers. The mistreatment may be in form of overworking children, starving them and depriving them of basic resources such as food. Therefore, the proverbs remind child protection practitioners to always be mindful that child exploitation and abuse is potentially common among children not living with their biological parents and should inform effective child protection measures. However, this does not serve in any way to underrate the mistreatment of children at the hands of their biological parents.

4.3.2 Proverbs and Their Potential to Undermine Child Protection

Proverbs could be used in oral speech or written word to convey information and advocate for behavior that would promote child abuse, neglect, discrimination, exploitation and violence. There are proverbs that could be used to cultivate attitudes, values and practices that undermine child protection, including those that might instigate violence, negligence, exploitation and abuse.

4.3.2.1 Proverbs Promoting Child Abuse

Some of the proverbs promote and justify use of physical abuse. For example, disciplining the child is a good practice under child care, but how the punishment is administered can cause harm to the child’s safety, wellbeing, dignity and development.

The following proverbs could be interpreted in a manner that would justify use of physical abuse.

Okuteera omwana tikumwanga (literally translated as ‘punishing or beating a child does not mean that you hate him/her’) – Runyankole proverb, Ankole community.

Magere gankoko tegatta baanabaayo (literally translated as ‘feet of the hen do not kill own chicks’) – Luganda proverb, Buganda community.

Akuba owuwe akubang'awumba engalo (literally translated as 'he who beats his child beats with the fingers folded) – Lusoga proverb, Busoga community.

The Runyankole proverb means that those who punish their children don't necessarily hate them but it is a way of showing them the right way to go. The Luganda proverb means that in punishing their children, parents should not go to the extent of killing them, implying that they should have a limit. Similarly, the Lusoga proverb means responsible disciplining. It is used in the context of punishment suggesting that a person who values their own child will always discipline them cautiously. That as parents punish their children, they should do so in a considerate manner befitting parenting.

Although these proverbs caution parents or adults to punish children cautiously or to avoid excessive punishments to the children, they justify the use physical violence against children through beatings or physical abuse. Therefore, the proverbs may be misunderstood and misused.

4.3.2.2 Proverbs Promoting Child Neglect

Other proverbs carry a message that could promote and justify child neglect. Ideally, caretakers are supposed to provide for and secure the child's rights to physical safety and development (World Health Organization 2004). Acting otherwise would constitute child neglect. Particular proverbs, if interpreted in a particular way, could influence engagement in practices that promote child neglect. Just like proverbs that could promote physical abuse, other proverbs justify engagement in child neglect. One of the proverbs that could promote and justify engagement in child neglect is the Lusoga proverb below:

Agatafumbye inhoko bw'olyaku amakagha osiima (literally translated that 'food cooked by anyone other than your real mother, even if it is given to you without sauce, just still appreciate')— Lusoga proverb, Busoga community.

The proverb may encourage starvation and underfeeding of the children whose caretakers are not their biological mothers.

4.3.2.3 Proverbs Promoting Discrimination

There were some proverbs that could promote discrimination on the basis of gender and differential access to productive resources. One of such proverbs, which applies to inheritance of the deceased and encourages that a father should always have a male heir, was found in Busoga:

Aghava enume ghaira nume (literally translated as ‘a bull is succeeded by another bull’).— Lusoga, Busoga community proverb.

The message carried in this Lusoga proverb is that only the boy child should have access to productive resources. This message could be contributory to the existing gender inequalities within Uganda as it is known that labor participation rate among males is much more than that of females, 90.6 %–78.3 % respectively (The Uganda Population Secretariat (POPSEC) 2012). This also builds a community based on masculinity, which does have implications on the girls’ access to education and their influence on reproductive and other public health decisions, among others.

4.4 Discussion

The findings point to the different contextual but related use of proverbs to guide socialization of children according to the moral and societal expectations. Proverbs form a critical facet of communicating to parents on how to bring up children as productive members of society that cherish societal values. The key argument that cuts across all the proverbs related to child care and protection is that they emphasize collective responsibility for child care and upbringing. This may not be surprising given that the ethnic communities discussed in the paper have a strong leaning towards collectivism. For example, Hofstede (1991: 51) observed that “collectivism... pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive groups which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.” Similarly, some scholars have argued that in the context of collectivism, “an individual is obligated to contribute to the community, not only because it is expected of him or her but because the ‘community is him or her’” (Verhoef and Michel 1997: 396; also see Hofstede 1991; Ikwenobe 2006). It is further argued that the concept of a person in the African collectivist world-view is “first and most importantly that of the community...this means not that the individual is selfless, but that the self is the community” (Verhoef and Michel 1997: 396).

There are two important aspects of collectivism—the suppression of the self in the interest of the community or “the idea that the identity of an individual is not separable from the socio-cultural environment” (Ikwenobe 2006: 53) and the notion

of “we are” as a basis for defining identity instead of “I am” (Bukuluki 2013; Tutu 2000). In collectivism, the cultural ideal is “I am because you are” (Tschudi 2006). In this context, man or woman is viewed as an entity that is not an end to itself, but rather a tool to serve the ends of others. However, even within the context of collectivism, we should not ignore the agency of individuals, which is used as a resource to maneuver structures and norms in order to achieve personal or family goals. It is also crucial to further explore how the notions and value bases of collectivism affect individual responsibility for actions in respect to child protection. Therefore, as much as collectivism provides cultural resources that may positively be used in child protection, it may also contribute to stifling agency and the important resources that contribute to fostering child protection. Proverbs also advocate for child protection mechanisms for the family and community. These mechanisms constitute a network or group of individuals at the community level who work in a coordinated manner towards child protection goals (Eynon and Lilley 2010). Yiga (2010) finds these mechanisms informal and often based on cultural and traditional organizational forms and sources of authority, which are mostly voluntary and driven by concepts of shared responsibility of child care. These provide a continuum of essential services ranging from physical safety for vulnerable children, food and shelter, informal foster care and psychosocial support. Caution is, however, made that informal traditional systems have limitations that are rooted in cultural beliefs and value systems, which are sometimes discriminative and abusive (Yiga 2010).

It has also emerged from the findings that most proverbs recognize the family as the primary unit of child protection. The key messages from almost all proverbs are that the family is the primary unit of socialization of the child, and as such, it must engage in activities that offer love and protection to the child. Many proverbs across the three ethnic groups underline the family as the most important unit of protection against abuse, exploitation, negligence and violence. Thus, these proverbs seem to be in line with the CRC call for the central role of the family as a unit in providing the best environment for the growth and wellbeing of the child. The message carried by proverbs could also be seen to influence behavior and practices that are contributory to selected articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) ratified by the Republic of Uganda and many other African countries. The call for collective efforts towards child care is contributory to Article 20, which caters for alternative care for children. The call for the family as an important unit of child protection is also contributory to Article 5, which emphasizes the role of the family in raising children through protecting and supporting them. It is also contributory to Article 7, which highlights the child’s right to parental care. Cautioning and informing caretakers on discrimination is also contributory to Article 2 paragraph 2 which urges state parties to take appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all form of discrimination. More so, cautioning and informing on child labor is contributory to Article 32 of the UNCRC (1989) as it highlights children’s rights to protection from harmful labor practices.

Consistent with existing guidelines for the protection and welfare of children, several proverbs underline the centrality of a safe and supportive family environment for children. This accentuates the need for early intervention and family support

services to ensure more effective protection of children (Department of Health 2011). In addition, the UNCRC emphasizes that children have a right to be heard, listened to, and should be consulted and involved in all matters and decisions that may affect their lives. In Sect. 4.3.1, it was seen that particular proverbs urge for respect to children and childhood and also caution and inform on child consent, which fulfills children's right to be heard, listened to and engaged in all matters that affect them. Yet another principle of best practice noted is one that encourages consideration of a child's family circumstances, gender, age, stage of development, religion, and culture when taking protective action. A few proverbs urge caretakers to engage in gender-responsive child care and also ask caretakers to recognize and respond properly to child development. The message passed on by these proverbs is noted to be one of the best practices in child protection and welfare. Therefore, certain proverbs, as explained above, carry a message that is considered as best practice in child protection and welfare.

As noted in Sect. 4.3.2, there are some proverbs that could be interpreted in a manner that would cultivate attitudes, values and practices that undermine child protection. In such an event, these proverbs promote such attitudes, values and practices mainly through providing a justification for engagements like physical abuse and child neglect among others. Yiga (2010) shares some views on physical abuse as he explains that the high premium attached to the notion of disciplining children at times diminish the boundary between positive enforcement of appropriate behavior and violence against children. "As a result, there are many acts of violence against children that would clearly constitute child abuse but which are viewed by communities as not only justified but also necessary for the proper upbringing of children" (Yiga 2010: 11). The justification and the method of disciplining advocated for by the proverbs undermines child protection values and rights of the child provided in the UNCRC (1989). The Health Service Executive (2011), on the other hand, notes that there are more cases of neglect than abuse and maltreatment in child protection. It is also noted that often child neglect co-exists with other inter-related concerns, which could explain why proverbs highlight that often child neglect occurs in families where the stepparents have the main caring responsibility. Subjecting children to abuse, negligence, exploitation and violence has implications as children are at risk of poor physical and mental health, educational problems, homelessness, vagrancy and displacement (UNICEF 2012). In societies where attitudes or traditions facilitate abuse, the environment will not be protective of children.

One of the key messages coming out of this study is that there are proverbs that promote discrimination based on gender, particularly for the girls. This is particularly in respect to access to and control of resources as well as participation in decision making. Such proverbs may contribute to maintaining the existing imbalances in power relations between men and women and may sustain inequalities in access to and control of productive resources. This also builds a community based on masculinity, which has implications on the girls' access to education, their influence on reproductive and other public health decisions that affect them among others.

4.4.1 General Observations

During the course of executing the study, we noted that there is a growing concern about the absence of clear mechanisms across the ethnic groups targeted at harnessing the potential of proverbs for child care, protection and development. There were very limited efforts towards documentation and raising awareness about proverbs as key tools for communication and passing on cultural norms and values.

We observed that awareness and knowledge of proverbs and what they mean in society is limited particularly among the middle-aged and young people in ethnic groups targeted by the study. Our key informants noted that the middle-aged and young people rarely make references to proverbs in their day-to-day communication or during formal speeches. There were concerns that the role of proverbs may be eroded over time. It was also noted that proverbs are not commonly used by the print and electronic media. Very few schools, if any, take trouble to teach local proverbs. This is happening against the reality that the traditional mechanisms for passing on proverbs from one generation to another are becoming weak and less used by the middle-aged and young people.

The level and frequency of documentation of proverbs varies from one ethnic group to another. The Baganda have been keener in documenting proverbs but even among these, it was noted that many proverbs are yet to be formally written. They are largely used orally. There is limited literature on proverbs from the Basoga and Banyankole. The interpretation and deeper meaning of proverbs is lacking in some communities. Some proverbs are actually misinterpreted and hence misused for child abuse.

4.5 Conclusion

Overall, proverbs carry messages relevant for child protection and abuse discourses. Proverbs carry positive messages and values for prevention of child abuse and promotion of child protection across different cultures, but they have been seldom studied. This article, based on data collected from three Bantu communities and languages (Luganda, language of Buganda community; Lusoga, language of Busoga community; and Runyankole, language of Ankole community) demonstrates that proverbs carry messages that have both positive and negative implications for promoting child protection. Therefore, child protection programs should harness the positive cultural resources as well as develop culturally sensitive interventions that seek to deal with the messages in proverbs that do not match the key values and principles of child protection. The mechanisms for documenting and sharing information about proverbs are weak. This implies that there are few or no formal mechanisms for raising awareness about particularly those proverbs that promote social protection for children. There is need to create strategic partnerships between formal child protection agencies in the public and Civil Society Organisations (CSO) sector with cultural institutions that serve as the custodians and promoters of cultural values and language including proverbs.

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