

# ***Bulala* as An Ubuntu-Inspired Approach to Enhancing Organizational Culture in Rural Kenya**

by

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## **Abstract**

This article describes how the value of *Bulala* (togetherness) informs organizational culture for employees inside and outside of the workplace in a rural county in Kenya. The article contributes to the literature in reference to how informal and indigenous practices of relationship-building community values like *Bulala* can activate a potential for ‘humanizing’ workplace life and organizational culture. Drawing from social capital theory and *Ubuntu*, we illustrate how employees can shape and experience organizational culture in a bottom-up strategy, in contrast to top-down strategies, through the value of *Bulala*. The article argues that these activities enhance human relationships and social connections, and affect performance and productivity too. Resembling *Ubuntu*, *Bulala* especially affords being called upon by leaders where they attempt to strengthen organizational culture through informal human relationship amongst employees.

**Keywords:** *Bulala*, social capital, organizational culture, leadership, Kenya, Ubuntu

## Introduction

Organizational culture comprises a set of complex values, beliefs, assumptions, language, social practices, norms, and symbols that guide the way a firm or organization acts (Morgan, 2006; Schein, 2004). There is general agreement that organizations with a grounded culture perform well financially and emphasize managerial and leadership values and beliefs found in organizational culture, generally (Peters, Waterman, & Jones, 1982). These values are upheld by organizations that inform how business is conducted and how employees, customers, suppliers, and stakeholders are treated. Organizational culture is thought to be good because it triggers innovation, flexibility, and on-going superior financial performance (Kossek, Lobel, & Brown, 2006; McLean, 2005).

Barney (1985) describes three conditions necessary if organizational culture can be sustainable and maintained with a superior financial performance. First, the culture has to be *valuable*, meaning it has to facilitate the organization to do things that yield high output and low cost. Secondly, the culture has to be *rare*, meaning that the organization stands out from similar others, and has a clear 'identity'. Finally, the culture has to be *imperfectly imitable*, meaning that while other organizations may try, they cannot easily or successfully imitate ambience of the organization. And if attempted, imitating organizations will encounter disadvantages, e.g., a loss of reputation or a lack of the very experience they seek to imitate.

The emergence of an organizational culture is usually credited to leaders, who often learn how to lead in the course of developing the culture. Also, strategic thinking and culture-building are usually credited to organizational leaders as well. Strategic thinking gives vision to the organization's future, while culture-building is important because it provides a context for that vision to occur. The vision of the organization that results from strategic thinking and culture-building outlines its characteristics, behaviors, and the ethos, and therefore, its culture. For example, how groups work together will align with how they can help or hinder organizational performance. Cummings and Worley (2009) noted that interventions are key to building performance norms amongst heterogeneous workgroups, and also for conflict management and developing group effectiveness. Similarly, French, Bell, and Zawacki (1983) pointed out that intergroup relations are especially important for organizations, further observing group and individual interdependence with respect to task accomplishment. The need to build organizational culture through leadership, vision, and organizational norms is widely established, if not always practiced, or practiced deftly (Cummings & Worley, 2009; Schein, 2004).

Organizational culture in Kenya cannot be discussed without considering the cultural practices and history of British colonialism, as the legacies and vestiges of colonization still linger in organizations. And interestingly, the colonial strategy of divide and rule introduced hierarchies within communities that continue to divide African people along class and ethnic lines.

The introduction of industrialization and capitalist modes of production also led to a hybridity of culture, local and foreign, where in most cases, local practice was demonized and held down while foreign enterprises were deified and upheld (Hackett, 2003). African countries and organizations are now faced with corruption, embezzlement, and the granting of favors driven by the elite class structures. Subsequently, differences along class and ethnic lines have become more visible. According to Kamoche (2000), Kenyan managers have reported ethnic differences in some cases leading to conflict. Additionally, Kamoche (1992) had earlier observed that ethnic favoritism exists in recruitment and promotion, while Nyambegera (2002) writes that the effects of negative stereotypes and ethical considerations around ethnicity are not fully understood and require more research.

Despite these liabilities, Kenyan workplaces also have assets. The community-wide group-oriented cultural practice of *harambee* (Swahili: to *pull together* or *do something together*; hence, pooling together resources) used to assist friends, families, and communities is also practiced at the workplace. This, and similar practices can inform organizational culture. Yet, much research on African organizations does so using Western paradigms and lenses despite the interest by African people for understanding in how their indigenous values inform organizational practices, as only scant research has been done in that regard and thus, sheds new light on organizational culture theory in general (Bolden & Kirk, 2009). Using a case study of organizational structure in one rural Kenya county, this paper explores how employee engagement in *Bulala* builds organizational culture, simply to record these practices, and to frame *Bulala* as a resource for increasing performance, productivity, and humanism in Western workplaces.

## ***Ubuntu*: Nature and Characteristic**

To understand *Bulala*, it helps to understand the more widely known notion of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu*, one of several related African ethical-values as a worldview; between these, “there are commonalities ... in areas such as value systems, beliefs, practices, and others” (Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005, p. 215). As a word, *Ubuntu* denotes *humanism* or *humanness*; it is a South African word, but related terms across Africa, including *Bulala*, portend the same thing. It should not be deemed a philosophy, unless by philosophy is meant a specific, culturally grounded ethical framework for action that is community-oriented. For this reason, it seems nebulous or vague when abstracted away from its cultural context; in specific cultural contexts, however, what is *Ubuntu* (what is “humanness”) is usually very clearly defined by community norms.

Even as an abstraction, however, it remains illuminating. Louw (1998) highlights the Nguni community saying, “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” (a human being is a human being through the otherness of other human beings). The word Ubuntu is frequently paraphrased, “I am because others are, and because others are, I am” (Forster, 2010). Limiting ourselves to a Cartesian/Western framework, this mandates that a “need to recognize the genuine otherness of our fellow citizens” (Louw, 1998, p. 6), however, it goes much further than this. Commenting on Kagame’s (1956) magisterial linguistic/grammatical analysis of the Bantu word *ntu* (roughly “being”) as found in *Ubuntu*, Mudimbe (1985) observes that “the Bantu equivalent of ‘to be’ [ntu] is strictly and only performed as a copula” (p. 189), that is, as a grammatical connector of two things. In the sentence “the night sky is black,” for instance, “is” as a copula expresses no existence in itself, but interrelates two things; similarly, then, the “am” of “I am because others are” posits no ontology in itself but interlinks to things “I” and “others” that do. On this ground, Mudimbe (1985) notes that the Cartesian “I am” not only cannot express *ntu* but that it is as yet incomplete; whatever the Cartesian “I” links to by its “am,” it remains unstated.

From this African humanist starting point, ethical considerations follow. Mbiti (1990) noted, “Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual” (Mbiti, 1990, p. 108). This is not simply a call for a recognition or philosophy of the other (viz. Hegel, Levinas, Buber), but more a recognition of a constitutive other, without which existence does not occur. There is more of an emphasis on the community first in general, though as Achebe (1980) makes clear in interviews and his works set in Africa, this community orientation is not denigrating of the individual (Achebe, 1980; Wattie, 1979) while Mbiti (1990) offers two other formulations of *Ubuntu* as “we are, therefore I am” and “I am because we are, since we are therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1990, pp. 36, 215), the Cartesian “I am” sounds perhaps too loudly. Similarly in the formation of *Ubuntu* as stating, “a person is a person among other persons” (Broodryk, 2006a, 2006b; Dolamo, 2013; Tutu, 1999). Khoza (2006) translated it as ‘humanness’. Etieyibo (2014) and Broodryk (2006b) employed the term to encompass the basic values of humanness, caring, sharing, respect and compassion, and a community orientation. We emphasize this distinction of *ntu* within the term as much to be accurate as also to avoid a tendency to collapse new or different ideas too quickly into already familiar ones that do not reflect or preserve the term’s distinction.

Again in the abstract, away from its cultural context, Bangura (2005) delineated three generally prevalent “axioms” in *Ubuntu*: (1) a religiosity or spirituality centered in the moral life, beliefs, and practices of a community; (2) a social emphasis on consensus building, as an African-style, democratic form for conflict resolution and group cohesion; and (3) dialogue, which is the ability to hold conversations with others and to make meaning of life through dialogue. Bakhtin (1994) has similarly written of a form of ‘truth’—and thus also instances of meaning-making—that can only be arrived at dialogically, via the interaction of historically embedded, concrete persons.

Above all, the assumed (or factual) irreducible interdependence of people—and thus an entire host of social claims upon one another that arises out of that interdependence—distinguishes a fundamental aspect of *Ubuntu* and related terms like *Bulala*, as distinct from a hypothesized (unbridgeable) independence between people that thus severs, denies, or only much more narrowly acknowledges any human social claims upon one another in the world.

The African Union and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) have called for an African Renaissance and urged for the revival of indigenous knowledge and value systems, including *Ubuntu* (Mbeki, 1998; Mulemfo, 2000; Ntibagirirwa, 2003). Within the African Renaissance discourse, the indigenous idea of *Ubuntu* can help to guide Africa's rebirth through more ethical business and educational practices (Mbigi, 2000, 2005; Obiakor, 2004). Here again, abstracted out of its cultural specificity, a notion of indigenous knowledge—as local, traditional, rural knowledge, practices, rituals and means for living and meaningfully making culture that is held in people's minds and passed from generation to generation orally (Rouse, 1999; Sithole, 2013) can seem overly vague, especially in the pragmatic, day-to-day world of business and management (Gathogo, 2008; West, 2014). Actually lived *Ubuntu*, however, is relentlessly pragmatic, sometimes overwhelmingly so (Mangena, 2013). Scholars of adult learning as well have long argued that *Ubuntu* has positive implications for adult learning. Specifically, they pointed out that implication of personhood through others educationally shifts how adults transfer knowledge and skills to children so that they can go on to take up roles in the family, the community, and larger world (Shiundu & Omulando, 1992). Similarly, learning and work come to be performed simultaneously and along peer groups (as in this study's case), and also in economically self-reliant ways that do not require the exploitation of others (Nafukho, 2006).

According to Mbigi and Maree (2005), writing in an organizational management context, the traditional African view is that a person's ultimate goal in life is to become a complete person, a genuine human being, at one with *Ubuntu* as an expression of human excellence, realized by living harmoniously with others in the community. For Mbigi and Maree (2005), *Ubuntu* represents a collective, shared (social or work) experience wherein the two are ultimately indistinguishable. Therefore, solidarity is crucial for the development of people and organizations. Hence, *Ubuntu* as a value captures and expresses that value, putting it into play for use by people in the community (Nafukho, 2006). In this way, to perform humane acts in a community is valorized as *Ubuntu*. Other scholars of *Ubuntu* in the workplace have stated that it can also provide a source of learning, competitive advantages, and opportunities for community and leadership development (Mangaliso, 2001; Mbigi & Maree, 2005; Ngunjiri, 2016). Further, given that *Ubuntu* recognizes existence in community, where the "we" is emphasized, it points to and supports relationships and human interaction that bind and bring to the fore pro-social human qualities (Swanson, 2009, 2010).

The criticism of *Ubuntu* as vague overly reifies its abstractions in the relatively few business/organizational studies of it (West, 2014), and it also misses the typically very concrete power dynamics that inform its deployment, particularly along gendered lines. Gathogo (2008) noted how *Ubuntu* privileged men and marginalized women; more precisely, the particular acknowledged humanness of women is consigned to the periphery with respect to certain forms of social participation. *Ubuntu* is often invoked as an *ad hoc* declaration about behavior both inside and outside of organizations; when shared as a value by members, it spreads power along certain vectors (Gathogo, 2008; Lutomia, Li, Yassine, & Tong, 2017). At times, *Ubuntu* is blamed for ‘free riding’ by individuals, who exploit the sense of social responsibility by others and get them to carry them, or as a suppression of individuality (Gathogo, 2008; Menkiti, 1984). These criticisms especially show the need to examine *Ubuntu* (or *Bulala*) in context, not just abstractly. The effectiveness of any ethical idea hinges not on just the idea itself, but the imagination of its practice by people in a community where it holds, a point our case illustrates.

### ***Bulala*: Nature and Characteristic**

*Bulala* is a Luhya word meaning ‘unity’ and is rooted in the Luhya people of western Kenya’s indigenous thinking and practice around various activities that require coming together. In the context of work, it meant people gathering to help each other out on farms. Women, for instance, would organize *Bulala* to work on farms for one another, and the service would eventually be provided to each woman in the community. There was no paid labor. Members of the *Bulala*, both relatives and nonrelatives, would work communally, receive and share food and drink, provide childcare, and help with raising each other’s children. As a social practice, *Bulala* expanded to reinforce community unity and to support intergenerational learning, co-parenting, character building, leadership development, and food security.

Presently, *Bulala* can be seen in communities in practices like merry-go-round (*chama*, *jumuia*, *shikwenyi*), where people put money together, eat together, pray together, and celebrate each other, in order to address problems faced by individuals. It is rooted in an acknowledgment that problems for the well-being of another affect one’s own well-being. Today’s *Bulala* are typically segregated by sex; few have both men and women. Also, while theoretically invocable and dissolvable for only a short duration, *Bulala* can be effectively permanent as well. Luhya community members both abroad and in Kenya typically belong perpetually to one form of *Bulala* or another. But it can shift with changes of station or social standing—more fluid than caste or ethnic group, it functions somewhat like an ascribed attribute of class.

*Bulala* can also refer to festivals. Among the Wangas, a sub-group within the Luhya who presided over a kingdom in western Kenya just prior to British colonization wherein the king and elders would celebrate the *Bulala* of *Obuchenjeri* in a two-day festival after the harvest that included socializing, various feasts, and events; and commoners during the same period had their own one-day long *Obuchenjeri* (Personal Communication, Francis Mubatsi Lutomia, September 9, 2017).

This difference in celebration length is expressly class-based. As such, rooted in an ancient belief system passed on from generation to generation by elders that contain an explicit moral imperative arising from an acknowledgement of *I am because others are* (Mangena, 2016), *Bulala* as a gathering together does not necessarily include a flattening of social hierarchies—or, to put it another way, *Bulala* is not inconsistent with steeply vertical social hierarchies. Just as *Ubuntu* could acknowledge the humanness of women, but frame that humanness in a valorized but marginalized way—much as the rising Industrial bourgeoisie in the West relegated women to the domestic sphere only while crediting them with superior moral virtue (Ellis, 1989)—the *Bulala* of *Obuchenjeri* acknowledges the humanness of elites and commoners alike, while still maintaining less opulent access to certain social goods for the latter.

These assets and liabilities of *Bulala* notwithstanding, employees in our case come to their place of work with this value or worldview or social structure of *Bulala* within them, and also find themselves advancing it as a way of meeting needs and handling many issues that affect their daily lives. From the above, as a more concrete illustration of *Bulala* as an *Ubuntu*-like concept, it is apparent that it blends together the categories of time, space, and identity (as the time and space where identity performs). Concretely, *Bulala* is the blurred axes of a duration, a location, an organization (especially hierarchical or class-based), and an orientation all at once. Although complex and non-distinct, the lived actuality of it is vivid, concrete, and sometimes socially stark. And within this, we note that the analytical categories serve only to illuminate a portion of the whole lived experiences of people which in our case will help to avoid oversimplification or misunderstanding.

## **Conceptual Framework: Social Capital Theory**

Social capital represents a commodity or process by which individuals, organizations, and communities form social relationships that later benefit them (Coleman, 1988). Social capital generally relates to close interpersonal relationships between individuals, just as physical capital relates to machines, and human capital relates to education (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 1999). Adler and Kwon (2002) further described three categories of social capital: (1) the relations an actor maintains with other actors, (2) the structure of relations among actors within a collectivity, and (3) both types of linkages or the relationships characterizing the internal structure of an organization. Social capital is germane to *Bulala* because of the exchange and human relationships that emerge.

Further, weak tie theory suggests that those who have relationships with individuals outside their network, or experience low affect and infrequent contact, have higher chances of accessing quality information and opportunities to access resources (Granovetter, 1973). Structural hole theory similarly asserts that those who fill structural holes within or between existing networks often gain access to unique and timely information as well (Burt, 1992).

Such direct and indirect network ties also provide access to people who can provide support for the information and resources as well as other opportunities they can mobilize through their own network ties (Burt, 1992; Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1973; Lin, 1999).

As social capital, and as also social capital generally, there are advantageous and disadvantageous aspects. While social capital affords relationships between persons along with group care, problem solving, group cohesion (in principle), and information sharing (Putnam, 1995), like *Ubuntu*, these advantages become problems when social capital affords free riding in the name of solidarity or an inhibition on individuality when social controls become excessive. Social capital also is context dependent, i.e., it's who you know, not what you know (Nardi, Whittaker, & Schwarz, 2000; Plickert, Cote, & Wellman, 2007), and such access, like the privileging of males under *Ubuntu*, is constrained for women by the very particularized way that they are positioned as human beings (Lowndes, 2000).

Day (2000) emphasized the advantage of *Ubuntu*, that it enables network creation, development, and the generation of social capital, the recurrence above of *Ubuntu's* "disadvantageous" themes strongly grounds *Ubuntu* as a form of social capital, while also operating as an ethic of it. In social parlance, *Ubuntu* is something you can have as well as do (Nafukho, 2013). Bolden and Kirk (2009) found that African people desire, and aspire for, leadership founded in collectivistic and humanistic principles. *Ubuntu* and *Bulala* as analogous terms offer a generative framework for talking about this leadership within an interdependent context. Thus, it has value within its African contexts but offers a framework to more widely understanding organizational cultures globally. Desmond Tutu aptly remarked that *Ubuntu* is part of the gift Africa has to offer to the world (cited in Mulemfo, 2000).

## **The Case of *Bulala* at Busia County**

Counties are a new form of regional governance that came into being with the devolutionary constitutional reform in Kenya in 2010. Devolution is a decentralization of power and responsibility to local units, in principle to enhance equity, efficiency and accountability in governance (Bigambo, 2012). Given the few number of studies on organizational culture in Kenya in general (see, for instance, Nyikuri, Tsofa, Barasa, Okoth, & Molyneux, 2015), the call for more research by Nyambegera (2002) becomes even more urgent given the constitutional reform. Our case, Busia County, is one of forty seven newly devolved county governments established to bring government services closer to the people. These county governments took over local and regional governance from defunct local authorities that were responsible for managing administrative and governance issues through elected ward committees.



Covering 1,694.5 km<sup>2</sup>, Busia County is further divided in seven sub-counties and thirty-five wards with its principle economic activities including farming, fishing, mining, and trading, particularly with neighboring Uganda. The organizational culture of Busia's government reflects a *Bulala* of inclusion, a *gather-all-scatter-none* approach wherein all need to feel part of the group, so that the majority does not appear domineering and the minority does not feel alienated, stigmatized, or discriminated against. There is a mode of *we are in this together*, rather than an *us versus them*. This provides a solid foundation and fertile thriving ground for *Bulala*, but we must emphasize again that *Bulala* does not automatically flatten hierarchies. When the "commoner" says *we are in this together* to the "king," this does not assume equality of access. From an outside perspective, the power dynamics and the corruption might seem completely unacceptable, but it is abuse of power, not power itself, that draws strong social condemnations of people not having or exhibiting *Bulala*. The "we" of *we are in this together* then confers a dignity to the "commoner's" activity, no matter how small it might be, because it is being recognized as contributing to a larger whole.

As part of a national government culture, Busia County is rated by the public on its delivery of devolved services like healthcare, roads, transportation and public works, early childhood education, agriculture, and prevention of pollution. In 2015, Busia County was among the top performers, which aligns both with its vision as "A Vibrant and Progressive County for Sustainable and Equitable Development" and its mission statement alike: "To provide high quality service delivery through well governed and empowered institutions; equitable resource mobilization and utilization; and balanced multi-sectoral development for the holistic benefit of the people of Busia County and other stakeholders" (BCIDP, 2012, p. xiii). Moreover, core values emphasized in this county development plan include partnership, gender equity and equality, respect for the rule of law and justice, citizen participation and involvement, quality assurance in governance, integrity, responsiveness, transparency, accountability, a citizen focus, and the environment (BCIDP, 2012).

While the majority of language in this vision, mission statement, and profession of core values reflects the premises of sustainable developmentalism (United Nations, 2016) and export democracy (Seligson & Finkel, 2009), the emphasis on "consultation, dialogue, negotiation, consensus building, and compromise" (BCIDP, 2012, p. xiii), while not inconsistent with sustainable developmentalism and export democracy, also invokes the dialogue and consensus building that are key aspects of *Ubuntu* (Bangura, 2005). Under professionalism and teamwork as well, the verbless phrase, "Teamwork, solidarity, and collective responsibility" (BCIDP, 2012, p. xiii) points to *Ubuntu*, particularly in its collective responsibility.

Some of the underlying assumptions around *Bulala* in Busia County include: all will agree to lend a hand and assist in times of need as agreed; that *Bulala* groups with many members from many ethnic groups different in political or ethnic reasons and contexts will not dissolve, even in spite of political rivalry; and that when there are changes in top leadership they will always support such groupings, continuing a sustainability.

This agreed-upon stability in advance from *Bulala*, supplies a ‘social insurance’ in the event of tragedies or shortfalls. To be sure, attempts to renege on or finesse these social contracts still occur, but the wide cache of *Bulala* as a social value means that even relatively disempowered community members in a situation can successfully use it as a moral whip. Similarly, where *Bulala* resembles a voluntary association, members can join for a variety of reasons (e.g. future political ambitions, desire to belong), benefit according to their individual relationships with individual members of the group, and sometimes opt back out when expectations around what a given *Bulala* can provide are shown to be unrealistic.

County employees are mostly Luhya (including the Manyala, Samia, Marachi and Bakhayo sub-groups), Teso (county residents), and other Kenyan community members (e.g. Luo, Kamba, Kikuyu, Meru, and other Luhyas from outside of Busia County). Historically, the dominant culture in the area has been Luhya; this is due to their numbers and because they do not come from other parts of Kenya. The rich and complex histories of ethnic, sub-ethnic, and extra-ethnic interaction in the area generates an almost unreadable density of signification, which the value and practice of *Bulala*, both in its senses of *we are all in this together* and the dignity of purpose and action even in vertical hierarchies, helps to negotiate. Towards this effort, Nyambegera (2002) observed:

Organizations located in areas exclusively occupied by one or two ethnic groups might reap the benefits of ethnic homogeneity at work if they employed such locals, especially at lower levels and in jobs with low technical complexity. Organizations employing several ethnic groups need also to recognize the need to have such a mix at the top, as those at the lower level need to feel represented at a higher level (p. 1083).

As in the wider community, workplace *Bulala* can involve the merry-go-round (also called *chama*, *jumuia*, *shikwenyi*), where employees contribute money periodically to a member according to a schedule generated earlier by balloting. By this, members of the *Bulala* lift each other up and enable one another to meet various financial obligations or acquire assets otherwise difficult to obtain, but also collectively spread responsibility for providing this money across multiple individuals. Requiring a smaller individual contribution makes it more feasible and functions similarly to crowd-funding (Kirby & Worner, 2014). Workplace *Bulala* can be organized across all administrative levels: within the office, inter-departmentally, across divisions, and so forth. Sometimes they merge to form larger conglomerates or, again, dissolve into smaller units.

Hence, workplace *Bulala* is enacted through formal or informal welfare programs for staff members as well. When one is bereaved, *Bulala* members come together to discuss how best to help ease the pain of loss. Some contribute money; others bring food, or take on various items from the burial arrangements budget and take care of them in the spirit of *Ubuntu*. Colleagues also perform *Bulala* for drinking enthusiasts, pooling money to enable them to be able to pay for drinks every evening after work throughout the month. During these social hours, colleagues discuss a range of issues affecting them, emerging business opportunities, and possible options for pooling together in partnerships. Matters of politics, group and community interests, and various social transformations, socioeconomic challenges, current affairs, technology and family/socio-cultural values and practices passed on through generations using oral tradition in the community are discussed. Employees who work together and hail from one geographical region will also meet on weekends to continue these kinds of discussions.

These forms of workplace *Bulala* are emblematic of its sense of *Ubuntu* in the wider community and are not rooted simply in a kind self-benefiting altruism. In one sense, *Bulala* is obligatory, although there are ways and means to finesse that obligation, as well as to opt out (in order to join another *Bulala*). Rather, it is rooted in a clear-eyed understanding that maintaining the well-being of the *we* is the means by which one's own life and identity (as part of that *we*) is maintained as well. While these obligations are sometimes tiresome, in principle they can be shared around the group. Similarly, while free riding can occur (Gathogo, 2008), moral exhortations in the name of *Bulala* remain available for all members, often with effective results.

As also in the wider community, this workplace *Bulala* proceeds from the premise and experience that enhancing the well-being of employees better enables them to be productive at work and to bring their best intelligence to problems and challenges faced at work. The adage *health before wealth*, as a well-established cornerstone of development (Lennock & Ehrenpreis, 2003), underscores this notion; inasmuch as “good health boosts labor productivity, educational attainment and income, and so reduces poverty” (Lennock & Ehrenpreis, 2003, p. 1), health in this sense is physical and mental, but also economic and social as well. Reducing stress, beautifying work environments, improving nutrition, and generally supporting happier workers all can positively enhance productivity (Kataki & Babu, 2002; Lohr, Pearson-Mims, & Goodwin, 1996; Virgili, 2015). In low-resources areas, or under devolutionary corporate neoliberalism that reduces or rejects workplace welfare under the banner of profit optimization, *Bulala* supplies a feasible social form for supporter employee productivity.

## Discussion

These benefits of workplace *Bulala* notwithstanding, they typically accrue more to men than to women. Not only are fewer women employed by Busia County, despite a core value of gender equality, but even were such employment equalized, after-hour drinking is something women do not participate in. Bedford and Hwang (2013) similarly found in Taiwan that gendered drinking culture norms limited, or denied, women access to workplace networking and relationship-building.

Echoing the observation by M. Harris (1998) that what an organization sets out as general behavioral standards may often be reinterpreted or rejected by the subsystems within the organization, *Bulala*, as a group norm set by team members, is also sometimes not in alignment with organizational norms. Within the organization as a whole, what is denounced as corruption, favoritism, or bribery on one view is generosity, networking, or gift giving at the level of *Bulala*. And also, workplace norms that maintain or privilege male forms of social interaction run contrary to a core value of gender equality.

While Cummings and Worley (2009) emphasize the shared values, similarities, and commonness often found in more “collectivist” cultures as a route to group collaboration and cooperation, Sosik and Jung (2002) aver that “individualistic” cultures see a diversity of group members—and thus differences of value-systems experiences—as better suited to problem solving due to the variety of perspectives it brings. We would resist this false dichotomy between “collectivist” and “individualistic” cultures; so-called collectivist cultures can, without contradiction, hold the individual in the highest regard (Achebe, 1980), while so-called individualistic cultures can, with many painful contradictions, prove oppressively conformist (Jung, 1971). The broader issue—apart from any collectivism or individualism involved—is the elite’s (or simply an in-group’s) maintenance of limited access by non-elites (or simply an out-group) to social commodities, like resources, power, information, quality of life, and life-chances.

Employees in Busia County are predominantly Luhya and reflect that ambience of shared values, similarities, and commonalities highlighted by Cummings and Worley (2009). Sub-ethnic differences within the Luhya play a role, but do not necessarily inhibit the kind of workplace relationship building and trust that Gooderham and Nordhaug (2003) highlight as essential. Such a workplace effort particularly involves no over generalizing the familiar norms of one’s own culture as a yardstick for assessing others or their behavior. Failing this often leads to stereotyping, diminished respect, and thus negative impacts on participation, collaboration, and ultimately, productivity.

*Bulala*, as a shared value, enables cohesiveness in the workplace to the extent that it negotiates and allows people to resist the kind of cultural overgeneralizations and stereotyping that affect the work environment. Robbins (2005) emphasizes how highly cohesive groups outperform less cohesive groups, even when both have high performance norm standards. Additionally, Hartley (1984) emphasizes how members of different cultures can only interpret one another's behavior adequately if they have some knowledge of each other's values. P. Harris (1998) suggested examples of performance norms that could be set by a work group to include quality work, productive behavior, competent performance, creative risk taking, team entrepreneurship, profitable service, power sharing, collaboration, participation, flexibility, research and development, and an emphasis on innovation. Given that members set performance norms to guide them in their performance of tasks, and that these tasks have deadlines for their accomplishment that group members' work towards while at the same time ensuring that the quality of work is great, thus, the cohesiveness offered in principle by workplace *Bulala* supports productivity.

Drucker (1989) predicted that organizations of the future would be flatter, information-based, and organized around teams. While organizational knowledge can be tacit (words and numbers) or explicit (skills, beliefs, and awareness), successful organizations access tacit knowledge by encouraging the sharing of across multiple individuals from different backgrounds, perspectives, and motivation for knowledge creation (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1997). Building trust becomes virtually synonymous with learning and alignment in an organization, as a key factor of organizational learning, performance, and productivity (Shaw, 1997). Moreover, when employees feel that they can make a difference and are willing to contribute to performance improvement, they often offer their tacit knowledge (O'Brien, 2001, p. 18). *Bulala* fosters this by making the boundary of work and life outside of work desirably porous. It creates a ground whereby organizations can learn continuously (Drucker, 1989; Senge, 1990).

## Conclusion

There is always the risk, when making cross-cultural comparisons, of generating false equivalencies, but also of losing distinctions because cultural practices resemble one another. One can align workplace *Bulala* with "western" notions of social networking and weak connections (Granovetter, 1973) or similar work-cooperative notions from elsewhere around the world, like *Guanxi* (Yeung & Tung, 1996) or *Wasta* (Weir, Sultan, & van de Blunt, 2016). On the one hand, this is due to the recurring organizational situation of creating or fostering or generating effective group action towards some end. But this recurrent, pseudo-universal situation differs fundamentally when practiced through the interdependent-actor (African) lens as opposed to the independent-actor (western) lens.

Workplace *Bulala* does not function as an add-on to workplace culture; it *is* workplace culture. In short, it is a community culture as expressed through the workplace. If we have used more familiar (western) terms and research to illustrate the various links to workplace *Bulala*, then it should not be thought that those more familiar terms are necessarily more correctly or accurately describe *Bulala*. Most of all, this should be clear in the structural sense of *Bulala*—while there is certainly a fluidity of group membership at times, being *in* a *Bulala* will often have more gravity than the (western) equivalent of being *on* a team. The range of obligations accompanying *Bulala* can be much greater as well. *Bulala* can reasonably and/or often argue that one co-worker should drive another to a nearby town for a personal errand without offering compensation for gas; (western) workplace etiquette generally would not see this as reasonable or typical.

As a form of an alternative set of premises in organizational cooperation, *Bulala* illustrates the boundaries and limits of “western” organizational theory. Therefore, it potentially opens up that theory and grounds it on a wider base. It also offers a series of practices, based in a more or less agreed upon, but still negotiable set of collective values that maintain organizational cohesion across factors that would otherwise disintegrate it and reduce productivity. *Bulala* can be organizationally taken up without requiring a complete reproduction and embrace of its originating culture. At its root, it is a valuing of the “we” that is less subject to abandonment, similar to the kind of loyalty and team-building that militaries foster and rely on (Beauchamp, McEwan, & Waldhauser, 2017).

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