

IN PRAISE OF BOTHO, LEADERSHIP AND KINDNESS AT WORK

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of Botho-Ubuntu, which loosely means humanness, compassion, or kindness, its applicability in leadership and business management is considered to mitigate the crisis of capitalism and motivation of people at work. This is assessed in the context of the nature of capitalism, how the system uses the management function as an instrument of work organization and mechanism of control over the labour process to secure surplus value—profitability. Through management capitalism not only exploits and underpays workers. It presides over deplorable working conditions, which alienates and dehumanizes a worker. The resultant effect is poor morale, disengagement and resistance which are expressed and released at the point of interface of customer service and occasionally via strikes.

Keywords

Botho-Ubuntu, Kindness, Leadership, Capitalism

1. Introduction

Culture is embedded and entwined in organisations. It is the life stream that flows across work relations and the mortar that bonds people on a shared the value system. Accordingly, Hofstede has concluded rightly that “organisations are culturally bounded” Botho or Ubuntu from an African perspective is a philosophy of humanness, kindness, and embraces inclusivity guided by the everyday social norms that values and shape our being as a people. Culture is not universal, different societies embrace varied cultural norms hence the complexity in seeking a unified comprehension of what constitutes it, however, Berger (2018) explains that culture comes from the Latin word “cultus” meaning care, that seems to resonates with the concept of botho, which is also associated with caring.

From time immemorial human beings related economically, socially and cooperatively to sustain themselves. Naturally these relations were underpinned by unwritten set of cultural relations and behaviours, which were based on mutuality, caring, sharing and compassion ((Mbigi, 1997, Khudu-Pertesin and Mamvuto, 2016). Botho is a Setswana synonym of Ubuntu, they define the same concept, and the only difference is language. Both underscore the fact that a person is a person because of others Bopape (2020). However, Botho has been used widely across disciplines and endeavours of life, Sefotho, & Letseka, (2024) situate botho to psychological justice, Matsagopane, & Luo (2023) relates it to education and responsible citizenry, while Prinsloo, E.D (undated) places it within participatory management, whereas Maribe-Moremi, D. (2024) locates Botho in leadership.

For leaders, to be effective they have to relate well and live with other people cooperatively. These relations are foundational to the core-existence of society in general, and transcend all facets of life.-family, religion, work, trade etc. In a sense they are spiritual as they embody our humanity. This conceptual paper explores Botho Cultural Construct as a Customer Service Strategy. The main objective is to provide context to customer service crisis which engulfs many organisations in Botswana. Such reflection helps to explain the antagonistic interests of employers and workers and provide insights on how capitalism works against the notion of Botho. Following, pioneering work of (Neal, 1997), we relate Botho (Spirituality) to the workplace, and extend it to employee motivation and customer care. However, from a Marxist perspective, there are inherent contradictions as the capitalist corporate culture (Turner, 1988), doesn't promote common good, instead it elevates the supremacy of the markets, accumulation of wealth by the elite, consumption and individualism. This is an antithesis of the core values of botho and the paradox of the neoliberal socioeconomic system and its inhuman treatment of labour. That is why despite numerous efforts to train workers on good customer service and exalt the virtues' of productivity by government officials, the private sector, local think tanks to global institutions, such as the World Economic forum,

IMF and the World Bank, systemic and structural issues remain unresolvable because the capitalist primary culture, value wealth creation for the owners not general welfare of the worker's. Consequently, globally there is a cry to address poverty, hunger, and inequality from households because of reluctance and failure of the capitalist economic system to redistribute wealth and share with workers who create it anyway.

2. Philosophy and Methodology

Our philosophical approach to management takes a critical realist lens. According to (Parry, 2008) realist paradigm examines underlying issues like power, relations, agents and structures which shape organisational life. This is a departure from the normative positivist management framework which negates organisational context, while giving credence to isolated causal statistical associations as the main factor shaping phenomenon, as opposed to a totality of causal components, what Hesketh and Fleetwood, (2006) identify as generative ensemble. A major weakness of positivism is ignorance of the subjective dimension of human action and the social milieu (Gill and Johnson, 1997), basically positivism sees business as enclosed entities and management as technical function. But as Morgan (1998), has posited organisations like organisms survive in an open system. It is in recognition of entropy and ecosystem, that critical realism acknowledges the contradictions inherent in the ontology of the capitalist mode of production, the essence of which are expressed at workplace in the tussle between the employer's drive for profit motive and worker's resistance against exploitation and defence for welfare. Recognizing this helps to understand the deep discontent by workers who are unhappy about working conditions and poor remuneration.

Realism stratified reality of generative mechanisms is a theory of social change. Hence, to understand and explain the nature and pattern of interactions of social structures and agents, it explains context. The premise of such contextual analysis is that all phenomena are in motion.

In these dynamic and dialectical processes there are contradictory interests between employers and workers, resulting in discordant relationships. However, these relations operate as a whole, interdependently in a complex unity of opposites as suggested by Marx's dialectical method (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1987). In transformation such contradictions are normally expressed through resistance to change subtly or openly.

These contradictory relations are rooted in the business paradigms, the neoclassical economics ontological and epistemic basis are not meant to bring workplace equality, dignity and compassion for the business stakeholders: society, community and workers, only serves to enrich the ownership. It is from this vantage point that Botho is seen as central to humanizing the workplace and labour relations, hence for Sefotho, & Letseka, (2024), Botho is a humanistic paradigm that seeks to recognize indigenous knowledge systems and as well as the restoration cognitive and epistemic injustices from homogenic western philosophic domination. Similarly Gumbo (2024) also buttress the impact of colonialism on the African mindset especially on the degeneration of values like communalism and collective. It is imperative though to acknowledge that part of the blame lies squarely with African leadership, who were keen to abandon their own knowledge in favour of new developments. Notwithstanding, the fact that Botho operates within the capitalist mode of production, therefore it is inconceivable that on its own it can break or dismantle the apparatus of capital, without being whipped to tow the global capitalist order. Therefore leadership only serves as a minimal lever based on the moral campus to do good and serve for a purpose, otherwise the power to change the status quo resides owners of the means of production but they cannot simply give power back, the global working class solidarity and resistance has to demand the change from neoliberal capitalism to another world that gives credence to Botho in the workplace.

3. Negation of context and Reproduction and inference

Customer service is vital for organisational productivity, efficiency and competitiveness. A satisfied customer is more likely to come back for a repeat buy because of the positive service experience. Equally, a happy worker will go an extra mile in meeting customer needs and expectations. Yet in many African organisations, the level of customer satisfaction in both the public enterprises and the private sector, remains uninspiring and pathetically annoying, especially to the customers who part with their hard earned cash for a shoddy service. One would for example based on induction and macroeconomic statistical data on the gross national product and per capita income, rates Botswana as economically prosperous and successful country, the same might hold in terms of general wellness and people livelihoods. But from a perspective socioeconomics considering the level poverty, inequality and unemployment this presents challenges which renders the concept of Botho irrelevant to the ordinary worker whose livelihood resembles misery, to the extent that salary is unable to meet the basics household needs, not even to afford a decent meal at work. The level of discontent amongst Botswana is acknowledged by "The United Nations (UN) World Happiness Report 2018 has ranked Botswana as one of the unhappiest countries in the world, ranking the country at 146 out of 156 countries" <https://yourbotswana.com/2018/04/01/botswana-among-unhappiest-countries-on-earth-un-report/>

4. Political Economy of Capitalism: Dehumanizing the Working Class

In order to appreciate the relation between customer service and *Botho* it is essential to locate it within a broader historical perspective – capitalist mode of production. Long before colonialist set foot in Africa, people related in communal welfare and collective solidarity. This necessarily means we must examine the economic, political and governance strata, where relations of work and production are embedded. Early conceptions of capitalist political economy were outlined by Adam Smith and Karl Marx (Bowels and Gintis, 1913). The capitalist system is premised on an accumulative mode of production and competition for markets. Its base foundation is creation of value through exploitation of workers. In this sense, capitalism is not just a system of accumulation it also about exerting economic power over the labour process which is exercised through leadership and management. So business does not operate in a vacuum, management plays a critical mediating role to assure financial positive outcome in form value creation and profitability to shareholders.

Capitalism is not limited to the movement and exchange of goods and services. It is a global phenomenon which also involves the exchange of management ideas, spread and shared through business schools which propagate the freedom of markets. Such knowledge is premised on Western a cultural knowledge setting vigorously defended by the Breton woods institutions as key mechanisms of capital. The human resource management theories such as performance management system, are one vehicle of transmitting management practices, often presented as the best practices. In time they become standard practice to be generally applied across public and private entities in managing people. Their universality becomes a problematic if the specific locale environment is indifferent to the new cultural milieu. Sometimes there is a convergence with global management concepts, as Gaie (Undated) opines that corporate social responsibility resonates with *Botho*, as both preach caring and empathy. Recognizing the cultural mismatch, business schools have developed courses such a cross cultural management and business ethics to ameliorate the situation. However, other scholars Lutz (undated) out rightly reject the encroachment of western management cultures as they view them as promoting individualism contrary to Ubuntu philosophy which is rooted on communality. In this respect, Luz attempts to propose an alternative to global business management paradigm, which he feels is consistent with the African context based on promotion of common good and justice. However, this is a half-hearted solution as it does seek to change the mode of production and relations of work. The underlying root cause is the capitalist neoclassical economics and structural foundations and agents, which drive business management as a mediating mechanism for accumulation of wealth based on private property, remains intact.

The competing interest between profitability for capitalists and welfare of workers are central to the provision of a human and fulfilling work environment. Without resolving this tussle for a fair share of the production outcome, it is inconceivable to realise *Botho* at work. Normally we expect workers to have *Botho*-kindness at work but the same is not demanded from the employers. It therefore makes sense to start with the employers and managers to adopt *Botho* as a value system of their human resource management. Then begin to actualize it in practice by way of recognizing the value and contribution of workers to the overall performance of the organization and profitability. Concretely that means, alternating and restructuring the shareholding to accommodate workers in the board of governors, so that they can have a say on decisions affecting their welfare and advance the agenda for equality, social justice and decent work as promoted by the ILO (<https://www.ilo.org/>) and embraced by Botswana government. <https://botswana.un.org/en/103534-decent-work-country-programme-botswana-2020-2024>.

Management theorists argue that the long-term success of organizations depends upon their concern for employees (Pfeffer 1998). This is emblematic from the vision and mission mission statements adopted by many organizations which declare that people are their most valued assets. The University of Botswana, which embraces *Botho* as a cornerstone of its values, just uses this as a marketing propaganda to the outward world, because how it treats its own employees by failing to pay decently and persistently bullies them into disciplinary hearings is completely against what they claim to stand for. So in theory this is truism, but in reality many organizations simply takes worker's as disposable costs (Marobela, 2008) because welfare is often put in the periphery of stakeholders claim. It is in this sense other scholars have challenged this claim as mere rhetoric (Legg, 1982, Guest, 2001). It is relevant to ask if human resource management has resonance with *Botho*. If that was the case the words of Mbiti "I am, because we are" or the Setswana maxim, "motho ke motho ka Batho" would be recognized by African entrepreneurs and leadership as a critical motivational factor and by extension a lever for enhancing social change. The recent strike of Choppies Supermarket in Botswana is a living illustration of how a home grown multi-million business with local shareholding has no regard at all for *Botho* values of equality, caring and empathy. It is incomprehensible that the Management of Choppies earn millions of pay in salaries and bonuses, while ordinary shop tellers earn a pittance, which can't even help to meet their basic needs such as accommodation, transport and food. Yet when they complain about working long hours and overtime without pay they are dismissed shamelessly. Even more embarrassing when they resort to labour laws for protection, the law is not helpful as it is the investor who is sheltered not the poor workers. It is such hostile and degrading managerial work attitude that workers feel dehumanized by work which cannot even provide for their basic subsistence needs. It therefore remains to be seen

if worker's welfare will be different under a recently elected government of Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC) which has set human rights as its underpinning governance philosophy, if such human rights will also translate to worker's rights for living wage and decent work.

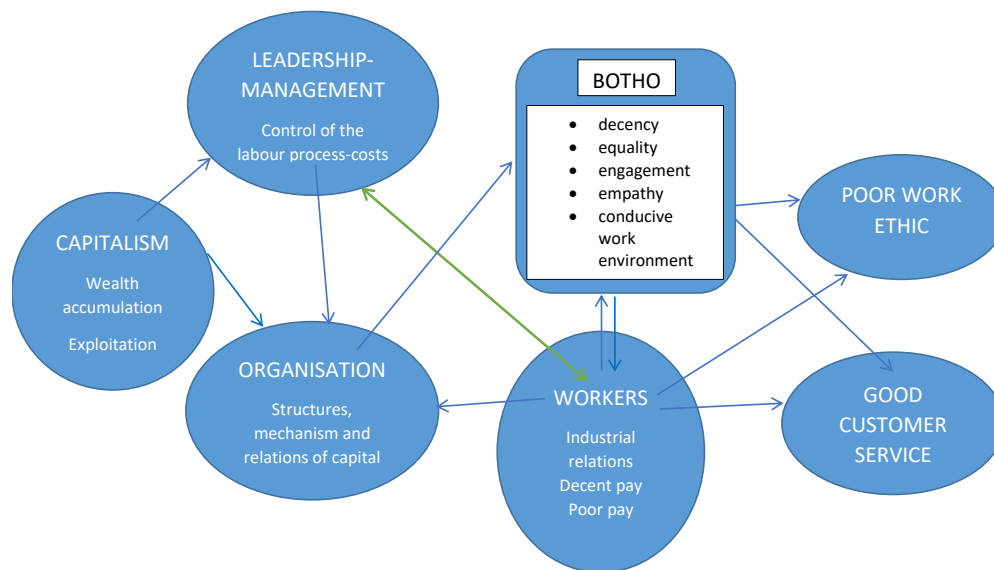


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Capitalist Relations and Botho Customer Service

Below is a schematic illustration of the capitalist structures and work relations which are mediated by the management function. Assuming without necessarily conceding that if capitalists were to re-imagine a new economic order which embraces the values of Botho as part of the underlying philosophy of people centered leadership, which recognizes the importance of good industrial relations and decent work, than the thorny issues of worker's motivation and customer service could be addressed through mutual engagement.

Failure to satisfy customer needs occur despite numerous training initiatives and management interventions aimed at sensitising staff about the famous axiom "the customer is the king". There are many reasons which have been attributed to this poor state of affairs- communication, job enrichment, culture, and outright Laziness, lack of leadership, poor rewards and lack motivation, amongst others. Predominantly such judgments draw from conventional western management perspective, with little consideration given to African traditional management values and practices which resonate with customer centric culture. Although businesses operate from a general principle of income generation via profit maximization and cost minimization. In reality, businesses are part and parcel of society, where it draws both material and human resources hence they must care about decent pay and decent lives.

Without people – the workers and consumers there is no business for business hence it is fair to say doing business is a social practice which interfaces different people from diverse social backgrounds, hence the imperative of taking cognisance cultural sensitivities. A simply greeting, smile and handshake can be a powerful affirmation assuring a customer of their importance and contribution to business. In this respect, entrepreneurs have to localise some of the global business concepts and practices by infusing progressive traditional management values which promote fairness, empathy, cooperation and justice. And above all paying decently in consonant with the ever rising cost of living. Without rewarding handsomely, there is no way workers can be expected to put up a smile on a hungry stomach. In Botswana it is common for workers who are employed in big corporations, such as supermarkets, petrol stations, Chinese shops, restaurants, and furniture shops, banks motor-vehicles companies, government and parastatal organizations to be asked for lunch money or transport money to help alleviate the shortfall. How then do we expect them to provide customer service when employer's fail to care for their human needs? In the end we blame them for being lazy and poor productivity, which is a destruction from the main cause, lack of Botho by business. In the circumstances, workers have no choice but to fight back by being indifferent and uncaring. This is resistance to exploitation.

5. Botho, Capitalism and Customer Care

We relate customer service to the concept of Ubuntu as generally practised in African settings and in Botswana's specificity. We recognise that the capitalist economic structure inherently promotes inequality and low pay because business wealth is not shared proportionately between the employers and employees. Capitalism thrives on competition, the level of competition intensifies as new entrants enter the market or when the product life cycles

declines. People are therefore a key competitive advantage because of their humanness. Given the requisite work conditions and conducive motivational environment, workers can be highly creative, imaginative and innovative.

Botho forms part of our everyday ritual which is rooted in our culture. It starts from home with family greetings and cascades to work where frontline workers meet and greet customers, often with a handshake and expressed with a welcoming smile. Even when a worker is not feeling well or does not feel appreciated. Nevertheless, a worker tries to be nice, as it is difficult to ignore customer's attention. This is particularly so in the hospitality and airline industries where close association and interaction occurs.

Having a sense of Botho and inculcating it as part of managing business can enrich and humanise some of the western business practices which are engrained in contemporary organisations despite the fact that they promote exploitation and alienate workers from their own organisations. Thus if Botho is recognized and appreciated as a part of business policy, it can be the main distinguishing factor in providing excellent customer service. However, if African managers apply Botho as a strategic innovative value enhancing management system aligned to their visions and missions statements, their organisations can begin to reap the benefits of internal customer focus and business sustainability. This is a great challenge to African entrepreneurs and managers to embrace dignity and equality. At the heart of customer satisfaction is both leadership which nowadays does not always inculcate a culture shared value and commonality in purpose to fulfil employees, customers and community needs and ultimately realize a customer centric service.

6. Conclusion

In this research we explored the concept of Botho, which is closely associated with Ubuntu, as popularly known across African societies. In Botswana's context, Botho has been used in households and families to inculcate a sense of humility, caring, justice and respect. Although the concept of Botho is alien to western business practice and less appreciated in Africa. However, if it's incorporated as part of the business culture, it has a lot to offer in terms of helping managers to be aware and alive to the importance of valuing people management because of its deep sense of interconnectedness and appreciation for efforts no matter how insignificant. Against normative generalized stereotypes which devalues people, Botswana workers are not lazy or unproductive, it is a response to lack of decent pay and bad working conditions which push them to the harsh socioeconomic conditions. Thus they feel unappreciated and alienated from the process which they have immensely contributed. However, they are not just giving in to management control, they find alternative ways of coping with and fighting back to resistance oppression and exploitation. The onus is on the leadership of both government and the private sector, to make a difference, even when the structural inhibitions of the capitalism are against decent work, transformational leaders always have the latitude to create spaces of intervention to promote good industrial relations by applying values of Botho to advance social change and better working lives.

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