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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Collective behaviour and moral virtue: comparing Kenya's Harambee and Norway's Dugnad

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ABSTRACT

Collective practices of mutual assistance are often praised as communal virtue, yet it is unclear whether they form moral character or merely secure conformity. This article compares Kenya's Harambee and Norway's dugnad through one theory, Aristotle's virtue ethics. Drawing on the Nicomachean Ethics and existing scholarship, it argues that both traditions supply the social conditions Aristotle thought necessary for moral development: repeated, shared and publicly valued practice. Practice alone is not virtue, however. Moral worth depends on whether participants act from understanding and settled character, or from fear of reproach. Harambee is vulnerable to patronage and status competition; dugnad to reputational surveillance and an unspoken norm of equal contribution. Both traditions also raise further questions of fairness, exclusion and individual moral autonomy. The article concludes that cultural practices are best judged by whether they move participants from compliance to understanding.

Keywords: Harambee; dugnad; Aristotle; virtue ethics; collective responsibility; moral habituation; African philosophy

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1. Introduction

Societies expect their members to give time, labour or money for the common good, and such practices are often read as signs of moral health. A philosophical question lies beneath that reading. Does repeated contribution make people better, or only reliable participants in a system of expectations?

This article examines the question through two cases. Harambee, Swahili for 'let us pull together', is the Kenyan tradition of pooling labour, money and goods for shared needs, from school construction to funeral and medical costs (Mbithi & Rasmusson, 1977; Ngau, 1987). Dugnad is the Norwegian tradition of voluntary communal work in housing cooperatives, sports clubs, schools and neighbourhoods, formally voluntary yet widely expected (Gullestad, 1992; Lorentzen & Dugstad, 2011). Their histories differ, but both place

cooperative effort at the centre of public life, and both raise the problem of how social expectation relates to moral motive.

The analysis rests on one theory, Aristotle's virtue ethics. Aristotle holds that moral excellence is acquired through habituation within a community, and that habituation can produce genuine virtue or its imitation (Aristotle, 1999, 1103a–1105b). The theory therefore explains how collective practice forms character and supplies criteria for judging when it fails. Rule-based and consequentialist theories evaluate participation by duty or benefit and do not isolate the participant's motive, which is the point on which the comparison turns.

This article makes three contributions. It reads Harambee and dugnad as practices of moral education rather than economic arrangements. It separates the social benefits of cooperation from the moral quality of the acts that produce them. And it treats neither 'Africa' nor 'Europe' as a single cultural unit, comparing two bounded traditions instead. The method is interpretive: close reading of Aristotle combined with a review of scholarship on the two traditions. No new empirical data are claimed, and the motives of no population are measured.

2. Aristotelian Virtue Ethics: Habituation, Voluntariness and Acting from Virtue

2.1 Character formed through practice

Aristotle begins from the claim that moral virtues arise neither by nature nor against it. They are acquired by doing: people become just by performing just actions (Aristotle, 1999, 1103a–b). Legislators make citizens good by forming habits in them (1103b), so habituation is collective and political as well as individual. Burnyeat (1980) shows that this early training is more than drilling. The learner comes to enjoy and value right action, and so acquires the capacity to understand why it is fine.

The community is therefore central to moral formation. Humans are political animals (Aristotle, 1998), and household, village and city supply the practices that shape character. Three virtues matter here: generosity (*eleutheriotes*), concerned with giving and taking resources; justice, concerned with fair distribution and exchange; and the friendship or civic concord (*philia*) that binds co-citizens (Aristotle, 1999, 1119b–1122a, 1129a–1138b, 1155a–1172a).

2.2 Acting in accordance with virtue and acting from virtue

Habituation poses a difficulty. If people become virtuous by acting virtuously, how can a beginner be virtuous before the habit forms? Aristotle distinguishes acting in accordance with virtue from acting from virtue. For the second, the agent must know what he is doing, choose the act for its own sake, and act from a firm and unchanging character (1105a28–33). The first stage may be imitation; the completed stage is understanding and settled motive. Sherman (1989) and Annas (2011) stress this progression from following to grasping.

The distinction gives the evaluative standard used throughout. A generous act has full moral worth only if it issues from a generous disposition. An act done from fear of reproach is of a different kind, even where its material effects are identical.

2.3 Voluntariness, honour and shame

Two further themes bear on culturally expected cooperation. The first is voluntariness: Aristotle places actions done under compulsion, or in ignorance of relevant particulars, outside praise and blame (1109b–1111a). The second is honour and shame. In discussing courage he describes the 'political' courage of citizen soldiers, who stand firm from fear of penalties and dishonour and from desire for honour. It most closely resembles true courage yet remains distinct, since it springs from shame rather than from the fine itself (1116a17–29). Later he observes that the many obey necessity rather than argument and are restrained by fear of punishment rather than by shame (1179b). Shame is not itself a virtue, but it suits the young as a

corrective on the way to virtue (1128b). Williams (1993) adds that shame can internalise the gaze of a respected other and so work as a moral resource, not only as a constraint.

These passages allow a sharper question than whether a practice is good: does it use shame and honour as scaffolding for understanding, or as a substitute for it?

3. Harambee: Obligation, Solidarity and Contested Practice

3.1 Cultural and historical foundations

Harambee draws on older Kenyan patterns of mutual aid in which kin and neighbours shared labour in farming, building and ritual. After independence in 1963 Jomo Kenyatta adopted the term as a national call to self-help, and it entered the national motto (Kenyatta, 1964; Mbithi & Rasmusson, 1977). Over the following decades communities built schools, health facilities and water projects through harambee fundraising, often alongside and sometimes in place of state provision (Mwiria, 1990; Thomas, 1987).

Its moral vocabulary is communitarian. Mbiti's (1969) much-cited formulation, 'I am because we are', presents the person as constituted through relationships. Menkiti (1984) argues that personhood is acquired through social participation and moral achievement, so that a person is made rather than given, a claim with clear Aristotelian resonance. Gyekye (1992, 1997) defends a moderate communitarianism in which the community has moral priority in important respects but the individual keeps rights, autonomy and the capacity to evaluate communal norms. Metz (2007) proposes that an African moral outlook centres on a relational ideal of identity and solidarity. These positions differ, yet all treat communal participation as a site of moral formation.

3.2 Habituation within Harambee

As a school of character, Harambee has evident strengths. Giving is repeated and public, often across generations, and children see adults contribute to funerals, school fees and hospital bills. Participants meet need as it actually arises, learn proportionate giving, and experience reciprocity over time, since today's donor may be tomorrow's beneficiary. These are the conditions under which Aristotle expects generosity and friendship to form. The practice also trains attention to particulars (who is in need, how much is required, what one can give), the practical sensitivity Aristotle attributes to *phronesis*.

3.3 Pressures on virtue

The scholarship also records how the practice has been bent. Studies of the Kenyan state's relationship to self-help show local contributions channelled through political patronage, with visible giving serving as a measure of loyalty (Barkan & Holmquist, 1986; Ngau, 1987). Thomas (1987) shows that benefits fell unevenly, favouring better-organised and better-connected areas. Where contributions were announced publicly at fundraising events attended by prominent figures, generosity became linked to status. This raises two Aristotelian problems. The first concerns motive: where giving is announced and politically rewarded, generosity is hard to distinguish from the purchase of honour. Aristotle's generous person gives for the sake of the fine, and he counts among the vices giving for the wrong reasons or from the wrong sources (1999, 1120a–1122a). The second concerns justice: if outcomes depend on political proximity, distribution departs from the fairness that justice requires.

None of this erases the formative value of the tradition. The same practice can serve virtue in one setting and status competition in another, depending on how contribution is recognised and for whose benefit it is organised.

4. Dugnad: Voluntariness, Expectation and Equality

4.1 Cultural and historical foundations

Dugnad denotes unpaid work done together for a shared purpose. Its Old Norse roots point to help, and for centuries rural households exchanged labour at moments of peak demand, such as haymaking or building. In the modern period the term has covered the spring clean-up of housing cooperatives, work on school grounds and sports facilities, and national appeals, most visibly in March 2020, when the Prime Minister called for a national dugnad against COVID-19. Gullestad (1992) places dugnad within an egalitarian Norwegian sociability that values sameness and not standing out, where avoiding communal work counts as failing a basic social test. Lorentzen and Dugstad (2011) trace its change from rural labour exchange into a broad civic institution.

Research on Norwegian civil society confirms the centrality of voluntary association. Wollebæk and Selle (2002) report high participation and argue that associational life contributes to social trust. Putnam's (2000) account of social capital supplies the broader background, though it concerns the civic benefits of association more than the moral quality of individual acts.

4.2 Habituation within dugnad

Dugnad habituates in three ways. It is regular and calendared, so cooperation sits within ordinary life. It is practised among people who are often strangers, which builds the civic concord Aristotle associates with *homonoia* among co-citizens (1167a22–b4). And it is egalitarian: the senior manager rakes leaves beside the neighbour who is not one. The practice thus rehearses justice as the fair sharing of burdens.

4.3 Pressures on virtue

The formal voluntariness of dugnad is its most interesting philosophical feature. Participation is not legally required, yet absence is noticed and the social cost can be considerable. Social theorists describe this as a norm sustained by expectation and sanction (Bicchieri, 2006), and experimental evidence shows that groups readily sustain cooperation by punishing free riders, even at a cost to the punisher (Fehr & Gächter, 2002). Dugnad thus produces high compliance, but compliance is not the standard of virtue. Aristotle's political courage supplies the parallel: those who stand firm from fear of reproach resemble the courageous without being so (1999, 1116a17–29).

Two further difficulties follow. The first is exclusion. An equal-contribution norm presupposes equal capacity and can disadvantage those who are ill, elderly, disabled, newly arrived or in precarious work. It sits uneasily with Aristotelian justice, which requires proportionate rather than arithmetical equality in distributing burdens. The second is complacency. Where dugnad is treated as a national trait, attendance may be taken as proof of good character and the question of motive never asked.

5. Comparative Analysis

The two traditions can be compared along the four ethical dimensions in Table 1.

Table 1
Ethical dimensions of Harambee and dugnad (author's analysis).

Ethical dimension	Harambee (Kenya)	Dugnad (Norway)
Collective responsibility	Duty to contribute to shared needs, expressed through kinship, locality and reciprocity	Duty to take part in common upkeep, expressed through neighbourhood, association and civic membership
Moral character	Cultivates generosity and reciprocity, but exposed to status competition	Cultivates civic concord and fair sharing, but exposed to conformity
Individual autonomy	Obligation is strong and often public; autonomy is compromised where patronage or status is involved	Participation is formally free but socially enforced through expectation and reputation
Ethical outcomes	Substantial community welfare, with uneven distribution and risks of exclusion by wealth or connection	Reliable provision of shared goods, with risks of exclusion by capacity and of moral complacency

5.1 Habituation

Both traditions provide what Aristotle requires of an education in virtue: practice that is repeated, shared, visible to the young and publicly valued. They differ in content. Harambee centres on need and gift, so its characteristic virtue is generosity, tied to reciprocity over time. Dugnad centres on shared work and equal burden, so its characteristic virtue is fairness among peers. The difference should not be exaggerated, since Harambee also involves labour and dugnad also involves care, but emphasis shapes what each tradition is best placed to teach.

5.2 Voluntariness and the sources of pressure

In both cases participation is neither wholly free nor wholly compelled, so the traditions are closer than a contrast between African communitarianism and European individualism suggests. Harambee openly acknowledges obligation, grounded in kinship and community. Dugnad formally disavows obligation by calling the act voluntary, yet enforces it informally. The second arrangement is not obviously preferable: an acknowledged obligation can be examined and debated, whereas a denied pressure is harder to scrutinise. Yet the openness of Harambee obligation can slide into public pressure and status display, as the literature on its politicisation shows.

Gyekye's moderate communitarianism is instructive here. It holds that communal norms stay open to critical evaluation by the individual, which fits Aristotle's view that the mature agent understands the reasons for a norm rather than merely obeying it. A communitarian tradition need not be conformist, and an ostensibly individualist society need not be free of conformity.

5.3 Motive and the distinction between virtue and conformity

The central result concerns motive. Consider three participants. The first contributes to a harambee because she understands the need, judges the contribution proportionate to her means and gives gladly. The second contributes because public announcement of names makes abstention costly. The third attends dugnad to avoid being noticed as absent. Their behaviour is indistinguishable from that of others who give or attend from understanding. On the Aristotelian standard only the first acts from virtue. The second and third act in accordance with what virtue requires and produce the benefits of generous acts, but they lack the ground that makes an act virtuous in the full sense.

Two qualifications prevent a harsh reading. Aristotle does not condemn the second and third participants, who may be at an early stage of habituation in which shame and the desire for esteem are legitimate scaffolding. Burnyeat (1980) notes that the learner begins by liking and disliking the right things before being able to give reasons. Motives are also mixed: one person may give partly from concern and partly from a wish to be well regarded, and Aristotle expects most people to occupy this middle ground. The question is one of direction. A practice educates well if it leads participants from esteem towards understanding, and badly if it keeps them in perpetual anxiety about reputation.

6. Discussion: When Does Collective Practice Form Virtue?

The comparison suggests four conditions under which a collective practice is more likely to cultivate virtue than conformity. They are hypotheses derived from the analysis, not empirically tested findings.

The first is intelligibility. Participants should be able to understand and articulate why the practice is worthwhile. Aristotle requires that the agent know what he is doing, so unreflective repetition is insufficient (1999, 1105a). Explanation, deliberation and the sharing of reasons help move participants beyond compliance.

The second is proportionality. Justice requires that burdens be distributed according to relevant differences. Both traditions would gain from accommodating capacity, through graded contribution in Harambee or alternative forms of participation in dugnad.

The third is the quality of recognition. Honour is not the enemy of virtue: Aristotle regards fitting honour as the natural reward of the virtuous (1999, 1123b–1125a). Recognition corrupts when it can be bought or attaches to the visible sum rather than the quality of care. Proportionate recognition that stays open to critical evaluation keeps the educative function of honour and limits its distortions.

The fourth is insulation from instrumental use. The Kenyan literature shows a moral practice captured by political interests, and the Norwegian case shows a civic institution captured by social conformity. A tradition stays morally educative when its purposes are not subordinated to those who benefit from its prestige.

These conditions also bear on the debate over applying Western philosophical theories to African contexts. This article does not claim that Aristotle explains Harambee better than African philosophical traditions do. The framework serves as a neutral analytical instrument against which both traditions are set, and the communitarian scholarship cited above shows that African philosophy has sophisticated accounts of moral formation (Wiredu, 1996; Gyekye, 1997; Metz, 2022). Future work could set Aristotelian and relational accounts in direct dialogue, asking whether personhood in Menkiti's sense is a better category than character for interpreting these practices, and could add empirical research on motives through interviews or surveys.

7. Conclusion

This article compared Kenya's Harambee and Norway's dugnad through Aristotle's virtue ethics to ask whether collective practices form moral virtue or merely secure conformity. They can do either, depending on how a practice engages participants' motives. Both traditions provide the conditions Aristotle considered necessary for moral development: repeated, shared and publicly valued practice. Neither guarantees that participants act from virtue. Harambee is exposed to patronage and status, and dugnad to the quiet coercion of an expectation that is officially denied.

The social benefits of cooperation and the moral quality of the acts that produce them should therefore be assessed separately. One community may enjoy excellent public goods supplied by people who fear disapproval; another may be materially poorer while its members act from understanding and care. Aristotle's theory asks not which is more efficient but what kind of persons the practice produces. A tradition deserves moral admiration to the extent that it leads participants from imitation to understanding and from the pressure of expectation to the free choice of the good. In that respect Harambee and dugnad remain open to both praise and reform.

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