

IVCO 2022 Think Piece

# ỌMỌLÚWÀBÍ:

## Rethinking Volunteering Through the Lens of African Communalism

Oluwafunmilayo Taiwo,  
BeyGOOD x Global Citizen Fellow



**IVCO**  
SENEGAL 2022



INTERNATIONAL  
BUREAU  
FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

OFICINA  
INTERNACIONAL DE  
LOS DERECHOS DEL NIÑO

المكتب الدولي لحقوق الطفل

The traditional culture of many African communities passed down to this current generation emphasises communalism, a system that not only encourages collective ownership of property but which attempts to ensure that voluntary acts for the good of others are commonplace (Etta et al., 2016; and, Abakare, C. O., and Okeke, V.C., 2018). As in the case of several African tribes today, there is a huge provision for the practice of communalism among one of the largest ethnic groups in the West Africa subregion, the Yorubas (Dada, 2018). The element of goodwill which, in part, characterizes the concept of communalism is significantly embedded within the “ọmọlúwàbí” (public morality) philosophy of the Yoruba people. In addition to virtues of public morality, humility, and integrity, a fellow addressed as ọmọlúwàbí gives to the cause of his fellow man and the community at large. Given this explanation, there seems to be evidence of a consistency between the African culture and volunteering.

Volunteering has evolved from singular random acts of kindness and ethos guiding the society towards a more structured approach on the continent. During the influx of missionaries to African countries, volunteering began to take a new shape, borrowing heavily from Christian belief, which emphasises giving. As many of these immigrants found different expressions for their volunteer causes – teaching, pastoring, healthcare services – community members volunteered their time and resources to aid their smooth assimilation into society. Represented herein is a structure of beneficial partnership.

By approaching volunteering from this perspective, the mindset of volunteers is re-engineered to engage with communities from a place of service, rather than saviourhood. Borrowing from the ọmọlúwàbí ethos, capacity building for volunteers should be incorporated with elements of morality (knowledge of good or bad and the ability to choose rightly), humility (a willingness to learn from anyone in the society), and integrity (to live in line with the commitment made). Like the lifestyle of an Ọmọlúwàbí, volunteering should not be a privilege, and opportunities for volunteering should be democratised to accommodate local populations. An example of how this is being successfully implemented is through platforms where young Africans can register community-led projects and also volunteer for projects that interest them.

Another important component of West African culture is respect for the experiences of older populations and a willingness to learn from it. To carry this forward, organisations should institute platforms for intergenerational collaboration that can serve as a funnel to aid the transition of youth volunteers into development experts.

Following close examination of the Ọmọlúwàbí ethos in addition to the evolution of volunteering, I believe these can help ensure the strengthening of volunteers and communities alike. Suffice to say that communalism in African cultures, when deployed towards achieving the SDGs, is capable of reshaping social good for the larger population.

---

Oluwafunmilayo Taiwo is a 2021/2022 BeyGOOD x Global Citizen Fellow who worked as a part of their policy team in Nigeria. She is passionate about advancing the health and development of young people.

## REFERENCES

- Abakare C. O, and Okeke V.C (2018). Communalism in Contemporary African Society: A Phenomenological Study. *Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of Philosophy*, 10 (10). 67-83.
- Adebanwi, W. (2014). *Yorùbá Elites and Ethnic Politics in Nigeria*. In *Yorùbá Elites and Ethnic Politics in Nigeria: Ọbáfemi Awólowo and Corporate Agency*. Cambridge University Press, pp. I-ii
- Dada, S. O. (2018). Aristotle and the Ọmọlúwàbí ethos: Ethical implications for public morality in Nigeria. *Yoruba Studies Review*, 3(1). 175-188.  
<https://news.clas.ufl.edu/the-depersonalized-as-vanishing-heroand-heroine-in-yoruba-moral-placards/>
- Etta, E. E., Esowe, D. D., and Asuquo, O. O. (2016). African Communalism and Globalization. *African Research Review*, 10(3), 302-316. DOI:10.4314/afrrrev.v10i3.20.
- Jock, A. M. (2017). Rethinking Yoruba culture in the light of Yoruba origins. *Journal for Semitics*, 24(2), 427-450. DOI:10.25159/1013-8471/3461.