

Ubuntu - “I am because we are”

Documenting the Ebola response opened my eyes to the power of this African philosophy



An African Union volunteer gives a health promotion talk at a community in Liberia

By Adaobi Ezeokoli

Ebola.

With dread we watched as it spread through Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea between 2014 and 2016. It spread into Nigeria, where I worked at the time, causing palpable fear. It was the largest and most complex outbreak since the virus was discovered in 1976. It left over 11,000 people dead.

I mused over what to expect as I packed my bags to join colleagues on a work trip to the three affected countries in late 2015. My firm, a public health consultancy, had been commissioned to evaluate the African Union’s (AU) response. I was to interview volunteers,

take photos, and record videos that would inform our final report.

The AU called for health workers and other specialists to volunteer their services to the three countries. In September 2014, volunteers poured in from across Africa, a rich mix of epidemiologists, clinicians, public health specialists, and communications personnel.

“We wanted to come and help because these are our brothers,” was a common refrain I heard. That led me to reflect on Ubuntu, an African philosophy their words, and work, embodied.

Ubuntu is a Nguni Bantu term meaning “humanity.” It defines a quality that includes the essential human virtues of compassion and humility. It is often translated as “I am because we are.”

When we arrived in Liberia in August 2016, there were daily meetings at the Emergency Operations Centre. The brown-vested AU volunteers came with expertise and technical knowledge. They insisted on harmonization of response activities and leveraged their experience garnered fighting Ebola in Nigeria. They played significant roles in contact tracing and case investigation, epidemiology and surveillance, and capacity building.

They were instrumental in the restoration of clinical services at hospitals that had closed. “We found ourselves in a desperate situation,” a doctor in Margibi, Liberia, told us. “We were really touched people would leave their countries and come here to support us.”

Many came despite their own fears, despite the risks of infection. They told me they felt a deep empathy toward their African brothers, and a shared desire to help.

It proved important to have African experts on the ground, to provide contextual understanding and gain trust. They understood the impact of poverty on how people respond to crisis situations. They understood the impact of culture, tradition, and community. They understood Ubuntu.

The volunteers were deployed for six months or longer. Some told me they had taken leave or resigned from jobs to come. Some were unsure if they would have a job when they returned home. Yet they chose to come and contribute to controlling the Ebola outbreak. They alluded to a sense of shared purpose, to the importance of saving the lives of their brothers. They alluded to Ubuntu.

In their article “Exploring African Philosophy: The Value of Ubuntu in Social Work,” Jacob Mugumbate and Andrew Nyanguru cite Stamlake Samkange and Tommie Marie Samkange’s book, *Hunhuisism or Ubuntuism* (1980), where the latter highlight three maxims of ubuntuism. First “to be human is to affirm one’s humanity by recognizing the humanity

of others.” Second, “when one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being, then one should opt for the preservation of life.” And third: “the king owed his status, including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him.”

I flew home with a deep appreciation of what it meant to have Africans at the frontlines of the fight against Ebola. Their courage, their presence, their commitment, was empowering. They gave me a clearer understanding of what it meant to practice Ubuntu; to recognize the humanity of others and to choose to preserve life against wealth.

My work in public health advocacy since has brought me into spaces where Ubuntu finds expression, from the call for better maternal health outcomes to advocating for citizens’ health rights in Nigeria.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we watched with dread as the virus spread across the globe. Health workers were again at the frontlines. We saw courage trump fear, and a shared humanity surface, expressions of Ubuntu.

We saw the opposite in the realms of politics and power. In the disruption the global pandemic offered, my musings increasingly turned to the third maxim of Ubuntu, that those who lead owe their status and power to the will of those they lead. It’s time to remind our leaders that they are because we will them to be. It’s time to restore Ubuntu.