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*Original Manuscript*

Culture & Psychology

# The homeless mind in a mobile world: An autoethnographic approach on cognitive immobility in international migration

Culture & Psychology
2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–22
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DOI: 10.1177/1354067X221111456
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## Abstract

The migration phenomenon, in which the mind travels ahead of the body, especially among would-be travellers, has received scholarly attention within migration studies. Research in this area has not unpacked the cognitive migration experiences of those who have already moved. This autoethnographic article explores the feelings, thoughts and experiences of an individual living abroad in the United Kingdom but cognitively imprisoned at his ancestral home in *Igbo* land. It draws on the concept of cognitive migration and the author's own experiences and feelings to introduce and explain the phenomenon of cognitive immobility, which exemplifies the dialectical conflict between the aspirations of longing for and emotions of belonging to a place against a simultaneous desire to remain distant from it. This article advocates the recognition of this cognitive experience of being trapped in place while mobilised in-person elsewhere in migration studies, providing a lens to view such experiences that have erstwhile received inadequate attention. This article contributes to the growing body of knowledge in relation to cognitive migration processes and experiences of those contemplating or participating in human mobility.

## Keywords

cognitive immobility, autoethnography, migrant transnationalism, international migration, cognitive migration

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## Introduction

At last, Olariche

She was the baby girl of my dreams

I dreamt of her

Then she arrived, like a tiny bundle of joy

I looked into her eyes and was overjoyed

Then, not long after, she said 'daddy' and even 'beautiful daddy'

She is full of surprises

On her first day at school, she nearly broke daddy's heart

Olariche rushed off to school without blowing her usual kisses

But it gladdened my heart that she loved to be in school

She is teaching Daddy new words that she has learned

At last, she came and is growing into a beautiful *Igbo* girl

Daddy wishes her a better future[1]

I shrugged at the prospect of scribbling my thoughts while seated in the massive aircraft en route to Abuja. However, despite the overwhelming thoughts I was experiencing, the preceding few lines were all I could write. This is more than a father's lament for his family, particularly his daughter; it is the cry of a homeless mind, wishing that his daughter would not later witness the same metaphorical homelessness he is living in. The plane departed from London, which I now call an *adopted home*, for another place that was once home which is now known as an *ancestral home*, where I cannot live successfully in but cannot stop yearning for. This yearning intensified following the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in global immobility and the impetus for this article.

This article uses autoethnography, a research method in which the author is also the subject of study (Ellis, 2020, p. 2), and the theory of transnationalism to explore the author's feelings, thoughts and experiences to explain a phenomenon exemplified by a stressful sense of cognitive entrapment that results in a conscious or unconscious effort to relive past episodes in places one once lived or visited in an effort to reclaim what one may be missing or has left behind. Such feelings cause aspiration of longing for and emotions of belonging to a place against a simultaneous desire to remain distant from it, causing metaphorical homelessness and the mind being immobilised in multiple places simultaneously. The phenomenon is partially attributable to the author's transborder migration.

Migration scholars appear to agree that migration is a complex phenomenon that can be studied using various theoretical frameworks (de Haas et al., 2020; Massey et al., 1993;

Schewel, 2020). Most migration research has focused on mobility, precisely why people move, how they move, and other processes associated with mobility and what happens during the voyage and transit, after arriving at a desirable or undesirable destination, and even upon return (Appadurai, 1996; Czaika & Kis-Katos, 2009; de Haas et al., 2020; Thravalou et al., 2021). And, more recently, immobility has garnered increased attention (Barcus & Werner, 2017; Carling, 2002; Conrad Suso, 2020; Schewel, 2020). Another stream of research of migration scholarship is emerging, focusing on *mental travel* rather than physical movement, and this strand is located at the nexus of cognition and migration.

This article discusses the cognitive migration experiences and thoughts of a London-based doctoral researcher who engages in 'mental journeys into the past' (Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007, p. 301), manifested by a sense of mental entrapment and the reconstruction of past episodes and an overwhelming desire to return to his birthplace, where his ancestors lived and were buried. This article will engage in conversation with the strand of migration literature that focuses on cognitive migration processes – like cognitive imaginations – of would-be travellers/*migrants*[2] (Cangià & Zittoun, 2020; Conrad Suso, 2020; Horst, 2006; Koikkalainen et al., 2020; Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016; Kyle & Koikkalainen, 2011; Rawlence, 2016; Thompson, 2017; Van Naerssen & Van der Velde, 2015). This body of literature, among other things, focus on the migratory phenomenon whereby our minds travel ahead of our bodies (Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016, p. 770). So far, the literature has focused on the cognitive imaginations and imaginaries of would-be travellers while ignoring those who have already travelled, leaving unanswered the question of whether those who have moved engage in imaginative travel back to places they have previously lived or visited. This article seeks to bridge this gap by utilising autoethnographic methods to explore and conceptualise this form of migration experience and feelings.

This article will draw on my longing for a place I used to call *home*, a feeling that creates the illusion that I am mentally trapped there in perpetuity. It will discuss how the outcomes of my social interactions, collective identity and the environments in which I find myself, particularly the Igbo people's socio-cultural norms and history, as well as my relationships (family and friends) in the United Kingdom and Nigeria, shape my personhood and this sense of cognitive entrapment and metaphorical homelessness. Additionally, it will contextualise the research method and arguments presented by drawing on findings not just from the field of migration studies but also from communication studies, anthropology, geography, education, cognitive neuroscience and psychology.

Scholars have argued for an approach – cognitive turn – that incorporates concepts and methods from cognitive and social sciences research, as well as cross-disciplinary collaborations, particularly on migration processes, to provide a lens through which to understand the cognitive migration processes of those who move, which could offer in-depth knowledge and broaden the scope of cognitive and social sciences (Kyle & Koikkalainen, 2011, p. 7; Vari-Lavoisier & Fiske, 2021). This 'cognitive turn' approach will involve examining people's imagined mobile or immobile futures to better understand several current migration phenomena (Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016, p. 71). Vari-Lavoisier (2019, p. 1) argues that adopting a socio-cognitive perspective on

migration will aid in clarifying thought processes in relation to broader sociocultural contexts. These calls resonate with the argument that in-depth comprehension of current migration processes will require combining concepts and methods from a wide range of disciplines, perspectives and levels of analysis (Massey et al., 1993, p. 432).

This article and its suggestions add to the literature by responding to these calls for more research on the connectedness of cognition and migration (Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016; Kyle & Koikkalainen, 2011; Vari-Lavoisier, 2019; Vari-Lavoisier & Fiske, 2021) through conceptualising this phenomenon of the mind travelling ahead of the body in retrospect to foreground it within migration studies. The article describes *cognitive immobility* as a stressful feeling of mental entrapment that causes a conscious or unconscious effort to relive past episodes in places one lived or visited in the past to reclaim what one may be missing or left behind. Because of constraints and circumstances beyond people's control, they may engage in physical migration or departure from a location without engaging in mental migration or departure at the same time, resulting in mental immobility. Such people can be regarded as being cognitively immobilised.

Conceptualising and expounding on this phenomenon contribute to the literature in migration studies and could aid in comprehending the processes and experiences of how people's minds can engage in imaginative travel with the prospect of providing nuanced explanations of several migration issues. For example, such studies could aid our understanding of various topical migration concerns, such as migrant transnationalism, return migration and the interconnectedness of mobility and immobility.

The article will proceed by discussing the existing literature on how people cognitively participate in migration and the research methods adopted. It then examines how my experiences and thoughts culminating in this sense of mental entrapment and metaphorical homelessness are shaped by a combination of factors emanating from the environments in which I find myself, my personal and collective identity, and social interactions. In this segment, the phenomenon of cognitive immobility will be expounded and conceptualised. The article concludes with a call for increased scholarly attention to migration issues at the intersection of cognition and (im)mobility.

## Cognitive migration processes

The texts in this section are not intended to be exhaustive reviews of the literature; instead, they will contextualise the phenomenon discussed, highlighting areas that require further investigation. A small but growing body of literature addresses the cognitive migration processes of those intending to move while ignoring those who have moved. Within this literature, scholars have argued that certain thresholds must be crossed before migration occurs. The *mental threshold* refers to the internal conflict over whether to migrate or not and why migrating or not is the best course of action (van der Velde & van Naerssen, 2011; Van Naerssen & Van der Velde, 2015); the *locational* and *trajectory thresholds* refer to determining which routes to take and how to take them in order to cross borders and reach the optimal destinations (Hagen-Zanker & Mallett, 2016; van der Velde & van Naerssen, 2011; Van Naerssen & Van der Velde, 2015). The mental threshold was categorised as the first stage of *cognitive migration* (Hagen-Zanker & Mallett, 2016).

Similarly, Kley (2011) proffered that there are three phases in the decision-making process would-be migrants have been involved in before they engage in the migratory process; the pre-decisional phase (considerations of migration), the preactional phase (the planning phase of migration) and the actional phase (the phases of physically moving).

Other studies examine would-be migrants' cognitive imaginations, or what they refer to as mental journeys, geographical imaginations, buufis, nerves syndrome and cognitive migration (Cangià & Zittoun, 2020; Conrad Suso, 2020; Horst, 2006; Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016; Kyle & Koikkalainen, 2011; Rawlence, 2016; Thompson, 2017). I will describe these terms below.

*Mental journey* was described as the move to a new possible location, identities and life outcomes, with or without physical movement (Cangià & Zittoun, 2020, p. 646)., whereas *geographical imaginations* are mental images of landscapes and climates, as well as sociocultural, economic and political characteristics of places we have visited and those we have not; these imaginings are relational in nature (Thompson, 2017, p. 79). *Buufis* is a concept commonly used within the Somalian communities, among other things, to refer to a longing to travel abroad caused by the inflow of remittances and information into remote refugee camps, such as *Dadaab*, which causes those living in these camps to have imaginations of life in places different from their present location (Horst, 2006, pp. 143–144). According to Horst, 2006 (p. 152), '… buufis as a form of collective imagination provides hope in quite a hopeless situation'. *Nerves syndrome* describes a sense of entrapment and frustration, as well as incessant daydreaming about migrating to foreign lands and eventually returning home as a success story (Conrad Suso, 2020, p. 189). The common characteristics shared by those who experience buufis and 'nerve syndrome' are an inexhaustible desire and feelings for life elsewhere, as well as a mindset of self-alienation from the present state of living (Conrad Suso, 2020, p. 189; Rawlence, 2016, p. 183).

Many migrants '... actively imagine themselves socially and emotionally in a particular place in the future days, weeks, or months before [they] actually "decide" to physically migrate. *That is, quite often our minds have migrated many times before our bodies do so*' (Kyle & Koikkalainen, 2011, p. 7). Cognitive migration is a phase in the migratory decision-making process in which our minds travel ahead of our bodies, at times unconsciously, to a new place we have never visited before, imagining a future social world (Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016, p. 767). Refugees imagine a world where they can study, work, marry and live comfortably with their families before reaching optimal destinations (Koikkalainen et al., 2020, p. 64). It appears that the migration bias that exists in the field of migration studies (Schewel, 2020) extends to this strand of research, resulting in a lack of attention, if not outright disregard, of the cognitive migration experiences and processes of those who have visited or lived in a location. The raison d'être of this article is to address this issue.

## The sin of being 'too personal'

Scholarly research protocols in a wide variety of fields advocate for the establishment of distance, objectivity, and abstraction in research, 'the worst sin was to be "too personal"'

(Behar, 1997, pp. 12–13). Autoethnography has been criticised as a self-indulgent and narcissistic method of research (Coffey, 1999, p. 155; Sparkes, 2000, p. 30) that casts doubt on commonly held beliefs about silent authorship (Sparkes, 2000, p. 24). Although autoethnographers are susceptible to narcissism, such criticisms are levelled to justify the dominant viewpoints that autoethnography challenges (Holt, 2003, p. 25). It has been stated that '(a) the use of verification strategies in autoethnographic studies; and (b) the use of self as the only data source' (Holt, 2003, p. 19) are the problematic aspects of this method. The criticisms that should be given to individual papers submitted for peer-review are frequently directed at the entire genre of autoethnography (Holt, 2003; Sparkes, 2000). Since autoethnography operates at the boundaries of disciplines, there is a constant search for universal criteria to evaluate autoethnographic work (Holt, 2003, p. 25; Sparkes, 2000, p. 36). Nonetheless, a good autoethnographic work must make a substantive contribution, be aesthetic, have a reflexive effect, and articulate a reality shaped by lived experience (Ellis, 2003, p. 253; Richardson, 2000, pp. 15–16). The validity of a story is determined by how it elicits an authentic emotion, and its generalisability is judged by how it relates to the readers' experiences (Ellis, 1995, p. 318, 2003, p. 195).

According to Duckart (2005), as cited by Chang (2008, p. 49), the expressions of self in an autoethnographic work provide a lens through which to view and comprehend societal culture; however, my feelings and thoughts should not be misinterpreted as speaking for others (Sobers, 2020, p. 42). Although autoethnography transforms the author into a vulnerable observer open to criticisms (Behar, 1997), it allows me to express my feelings, thoughts and experiences while also engaging in scholarly discussions to broaden or critique available knowledge and theoretical discussions (Adams et al., 2015, p. 37).

Autoethnography is made up of three parts: 'auto', 'ethno', and 'graphy'; thus, an autoethnographic work must utilise '... selfhood, subjectivity, and personal experience ("auto") to describe, interpret, and represent ("graphy") beliefs, practices, and identities of a group or culture ("ethno")' (Adams & Herrmann, 2020, p. 2). Autoethnography is better explained by citing scholars whose work I admire. Although Reed-Danahay (1997, p. 9) defines autoethnography as a *research method* that focuses on how *self-narratives* emerge in a *social context*, Ellis (2020, p. 2) simplifies it by arguing that the author is both the *researcher* and *the subject of the study*, and Denzin (2013, p. 124), taking an interpretative stance, argues that an autoethnographic project should begin with a *self-narrative* and expand outward to *culture* and *discourse.* This article employs autoethnography as a *research method* to unearth *self-narratives* interwoven within a *social context* in which the author serves as both *researcher* and *subject of study* to bring forth experiences that engage with *culture* and *discourse*. Most of the data came from my research journal, thoughts jotted down in the *ColorNote* app on my phone, and my ongoing cognitive experiences. The recordings were made on the spur of the moment and irregularly over a lengthy period, commencing when I began my doctoral studies. For instance, after taking a shower, getting up or simply completing a walk, I would be compelled to record my feelings, thoughts and experiences in my research journal or in the *ColorNote app*. The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and its aftermaths, such as immobility and a heightened

degree of cognitive immobility, provided me with a great deal of time and impetus to dwell on my thoughts, experiences and notes to develop this article.

The stories told here are all connected to the places mentioned above, and according to Ellis (2003, p. 194), 'there is nothing more theoretical or analytic than a good story'; '... qualitative data analysis is about telling "stories," about interpreting, and creating, not discovering and finding the "truth" that is either "out there" and findable from, or buried deep within, the data' (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 591). Apart from the stories, findings from other studies were used to elucidate and contextualise the narratives. Data interpretation and analysis are an integral part of the autoethnographic writing process, as the researchers choose which stories to tell, their relationship to the outside world, and the implicit meanings therein (Chang et al., 2016, p. 111). Following reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 43), themes emerged that illuminated and expounded on the contexts, my experiences and thoughts, and the phenomenon's conceptualization. The sections that follow elaborate on those points.

This article examines the experiences and feelings discussed through the lens of the theory of transnationalism. The theory of transnationalism concerns the processes and experiences that result from the numerous ties formed and maintained between those who migrated across borders and those who remained at home (Carling et al., 2021, p. 1; Glick Schiller et al., 1995, p. 54). I examine how my lived experiences and mobility across physical, cultural, political and social borders shaped my identities and culminated in the mental entrapment I am currently experiencing through the lens of transnationalism.

## Migration and episodic memory/imagination

Although migration enabled me to advance in my career and well-being, it also created conditions of immobility that triggered feelings and yearnings for the ancestral home left behind. Hammar and Tamas (1997, p. 15) defined *migration* as the movement of a person or more from one location to another within or across a country's borders for a short or longer period; a move which could entail a change in residency from one local or municipal unit to another within or across state borders(de Haas et al., 2020, p. 23). *Mobility* is not just about physical movement but also involves '… the act of moving entangled with power, norms and meaning, and involving social, material, temporal and symbolic components that make movement (im)possible' (Cangià & Zittoun, 2020, p. 641). *Immobility* has been described as the '…spatial continuity in an individual's center of gravity over a period of time'; which could be explained using the durations of people's stays in a place, whether in internal or international spaces (Schewel, 2020, p. 329). Previously, scholars have lamented the overemphasis on mobility in migration studies, which has resulted in the focus on migration processes associated with moving while overlooking those who stay put (Schewel, 2020; Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018). However, it appears as though the tide is changing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was a thing of joy to disembark from the aircraft in Abuja and wait for another 45-minute flight that would take me to Owerri, an enclave of the former Republic of Biafra. Although waiting for my next flight, I reflected on my life experiences in *Umuhu*, my maternal grandmother's village, which brought back memories of bygone

eras. Memory refers to a field of study and the neurocognitive capacity for encoding, storing, and retrieving information and a person's consciousness of recollecting things (Tulving, 2000). Memory is how content acquired during encoding and retrieved from storage is experienced; while retrieval is incorrectly equated with memory, memory should be presented as the reexperience of an earlier experience had in the past (Klein, 2015). Drawing from the concept of 'reconstructive remembering' (Bartlett, 1932), Awad (2020, p. 151) recapitulated that memory is considered a *creative process* of *reconstructive* remembering, as opposed to a mere retrieval from a stored collection of visual imagery. People use their previous experiences and imagination of possible futures to expand into the unknown *future* and *reconstruct* the memory of the past (Bjerre, 2020, p. 68). As such, 'looking back' is truly 'looking forward' (Valsiner, 2014, p. 118). Thus, people engage in 'constructive interaction with past, present, and expected environments' (Lado Gamsakhurdia, 2019, p. 169), which depicts '… a pre-constructive creative process, not a repetition of the past' (Valsiner et al., 2021) that becomes crucial to the individual's progression throughout life (Valsiner et al., 2018, p. 18). This article agrees with the notion that memory is a future-oriented, creative and constructive process (Awad, 2020, p. 151; Lado Gamsakhurdia, 2019, p. 169; Valsiner, 2014, p. 118) and not a retrieval of the past (Awad, 2020, p. 151; Valsiner et al., 2021).

Conscious memory can be divided into semantic memory and episodic memory (Corballis, 2019, p. 1). Episodic memories relate to those mental reconstructions of personal events that took place in the past (Michaelian et al., 2020; Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007; Tulving, 1985); whereas, semantic memories are the faculty that allow people to remember basic knowledge (Corballis, 2019; Michaelian et al., 2020). In sum, 'episodic memory, in contrast to semantic memory, provides access to the personally experienced event, rather than just the knowledge extracted from the event' (Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007, p. 301). Episodic memory can take two forms: recalling or thinking about past events that occurred, or 'counterfactual' thinking about a past event that could have occurred but did not (van Boven et al., 2009, p. 133). Because episodic memory is reconstructive (Szpunar & McDermott, 2009; van Boven et al., 2009), such reconstructions may differ from what occurred due to susceptibility to distortion (Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007, p. 5; van Boven et al., 2009, p. 133). Episodic memory is vital for episodic imaginations, in other words, cognitive migration. The information required to construct future event portrayals originate from a variety of sources, including episodic memory (Schacter & Addis, 2007; Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007) and semantic knowledge (Klein, 2013; Szpunar, 2010).

Episodic imagination is a term associated with cognitive migration. According to Michaelian et al. (2020), episodic imagination is best defined in contrast to semantic imagination; episodic imagination is concerned with counterfactual thinking or the imagining of a possible future event that has not yet occurred, 'whereas semantic imagination is the capacity at work when one imagines that such-and-such is the case (e.g. that Toronto is the capital of Canada)'. Counterfactual imagining of a future event entails purposefully and consistently constructing a new sequence of events; therefore, because the future event has not yet occurred, the people involved, the location and what emerges

are all contingent on the individual engaged in this cognitive act of construction (Szpunar & McDermott, 2009, p. 125). Despite the differences in episodic memory and episodic imagination, remembering the past and simulating future events require the ability to recall the past (de Nardi et al., 2020, p. 5; Schacter et al., 2008, p. 42). Empirical evidence suggests that people with limited episodic memory abilities, particularly for past events, also have a similar inability to cognitively imagine a future personal event or notional occurrence (Schacter & Addis, 2020; Szpunar & McDermott, 2009).

Migration research has concentrated on how individuals use their episodic memory and semantic knowledge base to engage in episodic imagination or cognitive migration. Despite the critical role of episodic memory in the construction of cognitive migration, there is a lack of focus on the cognitive experiences of mentally reliving places and people by those who have moved or visited a site that relies heavily on episodic memory. As a result, it appears as though the migration literature has addressed insufficiently – or even ignored – issues concerning how those who have moved or visited a place use their episodic memories to reconstruct past episodes, particularly sights, scenes, sounds and smells. Experts in the field of migration studies have argued that 'migration' – in this case, *mobility* – and *immobility* are related and concurrent within households (Blondin, 2021, p. 297; Mata-Codesal, 2015, p. 2286) and that 'mobility and immobility are two sides of the same coin' and should only be distinguished for analytical considerations (Salazar, 2016, p. 38). Thus, if cognitive experiences and strategies associated with *cognitive migration* exist, they should also exist on the 'other side of the coin' – *immobility* – which I will refer to as *cognitive immobility*. That is, anyone capable of engaging in cognitive migration may at some point experience *cognitive immobility*.

## Identity, place and cognitive (Im)mobility

I self-identify mainly as an Igbo man based in London. From my self-identification, it is self-evident that a *place* is critical for conveying meanings about my *personhood* in the manner that I desire. 'In effect, there is *no place without self; and no self without place*' (Casey, 2001, p. 406 italics in original). It is certain that this *place* has not remained static nor some aspects of my *self* – identity. 'The *self* always locates *himself* or herself in a particular temporal position somewhere between the *past* and the *future*' (Lado Gamsakhurdia, 2019, p. 168 italics mine). By *place*, I mean the locations in which I find *myself* for a brief or extended period; in this article, I discuss two locations, mainly, but not only, my *adopted home* and *ancestral home*. Thus, '..."homes" extend beyond single localities because they involve transnational networks' (Moskal, 2015, p. 151). The notion that my identity evolves in response to my environment resonates with the argument that identity is constantly created and altered (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 41). My self-identification markers convey both my individuality and cultural identity as an Igbo person. Through our interactions with others, we negotiate, establish, sustain and modify our identities; we confirm who we are by comparing and contrasting ourselves to others (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 29; Hecht et al., 2003, p. 41); whether it is an individual or collective identity, a 'natural' identity does not exist (Agius & Keep, 2018, p. 51).

Among the cultural values of the Igbo people which I believe that have shaped my worldview, especially how I relate with my ancestral home are the *'aku ruo ulo okwuo onye kpara ya'*[3] maxim (Obunike, 2016; Okonkwo & Obi-Ani, 2020) and the concept of *Ahamefuna* (Okwuosa et al., 2021). 'Aku ruo ulo okwuo onye kpara ya' is a well-known Igbo maxim that instils the notion in the Igbo people that whatever resources one owns beyond the home are meaningless unless they are mirrored at home; in other words, generosity should begin at home and spread to other locations. It is a non-stop call for those in diaspora – outside of Igbo land – to remember home and bring back their best to the village. *Ahamefuna* is a concept that promotes the idea that no Igbo individual should be forgotten by their community or lineage, and serves as a source of strength for Igbos in their efforts to remember their origin, identity and communal expectations (Okwuosa et al., 2021, p. 7). Because identity is derived from community, collective success is superior in Igboland, as evidenced by the rebuilding of Igbo towns and infrastructures immediately following the Nigeria–Biafra civil war (Okwuosa et al., 2021, p. 8).

The maxim of 'aku ruo ulo okwuo onye kpara ya' and concept of *Ahamefuna* which are imbibed in the Igbos from an early stage in life has shaped my understanding of my personhood and how I relate and view the places I now call my *ancestral* and *adopted* homes and the people therein. These value systems operate like the lens through which I perceive occurrences. These value systems can affect my thoughts, as evidenced by my conversation with a friend. Some years ago, a friend asked me what I would do if I won x amount in the lottery, which I do not play. I attempted to gauge his opinion first by insisting that he respond; he stated that he would use it to purchase a nice car, a Ferrari to be precise; my response was that I would use mine to buy building materials for erecting a house in my village. Until recently, I had not considered how or why I gave that response. He continues to make a joke out of it by referring to me as a village boy.

It was the anti-Igbo pogroms of May 29th, July 29th, September 29th and October 29th, 1966, where over 30,000 people were killed, mostly Igbos, in many parts of Northern Nigeria (Korieh, 2013; Smith, 2014), with the outbreak of the Nigeria–Biafra civil war on July 6th, 1967, that led to the displacement of millions of Igbos and others living in other parts of Nigeria back to their villages (Forsyth, 1969; Smith, 2014). I will argue that the experiences of those displaced back to Igbo land during the war and in the post-war era may have bolstered support for the *'aku ruo ulo okwuo onye kpara ya'* maxim among the Igbos in the post-war era. Many IDPs who returned to their villages became homeless, a situation compounded by the circumstances of the civil war. In addition, in the post-war era, because of the 'Abandoned Property Decree', many Igbos lost properties located in other regions of Nigeria (Chukwuezi, 2001, p. 56; Okwuosa et al., 2021, p. 4). It is now customary for Igbo people to build houses in their communities before constructing buildings elsewhere. Consequently, there are hundreds of uninhabited houses in Igbo land today, including that of my dad. Thus, growing up in an Igbo community shaped my identity and allowed for the accumulation of memories, resulting in my sense of place attachment to the Igbo people, their landscape and way of life. Similarly, moving to Germany and later to England engendered memories and a sense of attachment to those locations, altering my identity in the process. Thus, my identity and

memories are inextricably linked to these places; memories are rooted in concepts of place and identity (de Nardi et al., 2020, p. 3).

Memory is a future-oriented and creative process of 'reconstructive remembering' (Awad, 2020, p. 151; Bjerre, 2020, p. 68; Lado Gamsakhurdia, 2019, p. 169; Valsiner, 2014, p. 118). Reliving past events can be pleasurable, but it can be challenging to deal with when you must constantly recreate scenes and people in locations other than your current one. My journey towards recognising this feeling started when I moved to Germany to study; it was a thing of joy and an aspiration fulfilled. However, upon settling down, I began having a constant urge of thinking about places that I had been, most especially my ancestral home. It was a bit of a distraction to my studies but I tried to ignore it. I was lucky to be living in student accommodation, which provided me with enough distractions from such thoughts. After completing the first semester examinations, I bought a plane ticket and went home; which was a heavy relief. Although at home, I had no such thoughts of home again but was engrossed in the daily living and activities common back home.

When I am away from my ancestral home, I miss the fresh air I inhale as I walk barefoot into the bush behind our summer house on my way to *dee* Fred's house, a bosom friend of my late father – *dee* Stephen. I will pause for a moment to consider the fruits I purchase from my elderly friend at the village market, whose neighbour's 'natural' palm wine, plucked from the palm trees, tastes so good that I often deliberately spend time there to consume more. The thought of being with my folks at Christmas, walking barefoot from my father's summer house to his brothers' to hang out and chat with my cousins who have returned from Spain or other cities in Nigeria and who are unknowingly afflicted with the same 'disease' of *cognitive immobility*, is difficult to bear. When I visit my ancestral home, I dread the prospect of returning to Germany at the end of my brief vacation, but I was compelled to return for my studies. For the remainder of my years in Germany, I travelled back and forth to my ancestral home whenever I had the means and spent as much time there as I could afford. After completing my studies in Germany, I moved to the United Kingdom, where I began an MSc programme at the University of London.

Although I was living in London and married, I had this constant yearning to return to my ancestral home. However, the feelings were strongest in London, but this time it came with a twist: the feelings were in both directions, towards my ancestral and adopted homes. Thus, the arrival of 'Olariche' – our daughter – transformed my feeling of cognitive immobility into a two-way phenomenon; my mind simultaneously became immobilised in multiple places. So, while on the plane to Nigeria, I was already missing London, despite being eager to leave London for the ancestral home only a few hours earlier. Thus, my mind wandered to London and attempted to reconstruct mental simulations of my experiences there, causing me to have this challenging and stressful sense of mental entrapment in London. Therefore, I could not help but pen those lines that came at the beginning of this article to ease those stressful feelings I was having while seated in that massive 'metal bird' that flies. I experience what Cangià and Zittoun (2020, p. 646) described as a feeling of '.. an ambivalent condition between *not being anymore (there)* and *not being yet (here)*', which resonates with the argument that 'modern man has

suffered from a deepening condition of "homelessness"' (Berger et al., 1974, p. 77). This sense of metaphorical homelessness is very stressful and brings tears to my eyes, and I feel like I do not know where I belong anymore. 'This metaphysical loss of home is a difficult psychological feeling to endure' (Berger et al., 1974, p. 77).

## *Cognitive immobility*

This feeling, which I have been experiencing for several years, contrasts with what Koikkalainen and Kyle (2016, p. 770) refer to as 'cognitive migration', a term used to describe the migratory phase during which the mind travels ahead of the body, whereas the concept of cognitive migration entails people conjuring up events that never occurred, those who suffer from cognitive immobility experience a sense of mental entrapment and are confronted with the prospect of mentally revisiting locations where their minds are presumed to be trapped. The mind is made to move in cognitive migration, whereas in cognitive immobility, the person whose mind has been trapped elsewhere attempts to reclaim it through reliving past episodes.

Broadly, *cognitive immobility* can be defined as a stressful sense of mental entrapment in a particular location or several locations, which may result in mind-wandering activities in which a person's mind travels to previously lived or visited areas, drawing on episodic memory to recreate mental simulations of scenes, smells, sounds and sights from those previous encounters with or without cognitive control over the mind. Cognitive immobility occurs when an individual is unable to stay put in the intended place due to the *absence* or *presence* of certain *restrictions* or *circumstances* beyond their control, which may originate in their present or desired location, inside themselves, or in the external world. These *restrictions* and *circumstances* may necessitate their physical migration or departure, not their *mental migration* or *departure*. As a result, their mobility resulted in mental immobility, and such people can be described as being *cognitively immobilised*. Although the body departs, the mind will be immobilised at the place from which the body departed, which may result in cognitive immobility. Such a sense of immobility may lead to future efforts in search of what the person left behind – sights, sounds, smells and scenes of the past episodes – resulting in reconstructive remembering, which can at times be stressful and exhausting. Thus, physical mobility causes cognitive immobility in a single or several places, necessitating physical return to such a site. In specific settings, particularly those involving cognitive immobility, mobility induces immobility; likewise, immobility necessitates mobility.

Cognitive immobility is a phase of the migratory process during which individuals experience a stressful sense of mental entrapment in previous homes or destinations. Such stressful feelings of mental entrapment could be consciously or unconsciously enacted for a brief or extended period and can result in feelings that could affect our emotional and behavioural patterns. Christoff et al. (2016) argue that thought processes can be automatically constrained by mechanisms independent of cognitive control that can attract and sustain attention, such as thoughts or mental experience (affective salience) and elements of current sensory perception (sensory salience). Thus, externally oriented mechanisms that are not under our cognitive control could be the sources of this type of mental

entrapment to a place. The mechanism could be activated by pleasant or unpleasant memories of people, incidents, cultures and places. The place or location could be a spatial environment that someone used to call home, a tourist site or other venues. According to de Vryer (1989, p. 75), leaving one's nation initiates a mourning process, and, citing Bowlby (1961), the author stated that there are three stages of the mourning process:

> The first one is dominated by separation anxiety, grief and efforts to recover the object. Retrieval has been given up in the second stage, when the focus is no longer on the lost object. It is accompanied by pain and despair-depression. The third phase heralds reorganization, which may include maintaining values and pursuing goals that have developed in association with the lost object.

Cognitive immobility can be related to the three stages of the mourning process, which firstly entails the separation, anxiety and grief associated with the stressful sense of mental entrapment after departure, which will result in efforts at retrieval of the object lost, a cognitive experience which could cause pain and despair-depression. Then comes the last stage, which involves efforts to maintain values and pursue goals that will reduce the sense of loss.

The term 'homesickness' is frequently used in human resource management and geography to refer to some of the experiences associated with cognitive immobility. Although cognitive immobility is not synonymous with homesickness, one could argue that homesickness is related to it if not encompassed in it. Homesickness has been described as a state of anguish experienced by people who move from their house or home to new and unfamiliar surroundings, characterised by a yearning for the home they left behind and physical and psychological ailments (van Tilburg et al., 1996, p. 899). This definition emphasises the aspirations for a place and asserts that homesickness is a disease. Additionally, homesickness has been defined as '... that longing or desire for return to a rooted place, relying on the recurring memory of lived experience' (Bryan, 2005, p. 44). A longing that researchers agree can be alleviated through 'in-person visits' or scanning the web for home news (Morse & Mudgett, 2017, p. 101; Nakajima, 2019, p. 3451). Returning in person to the locations we yearn for can certainly alleviate the stress associated with cognitive immobility; that's the only therapy I use for now. However, in some cases, the undesirable memories we reconstruct about a place may preclude us from having an in-person visit; visiting can exacerbate our emotional pain and should therefore be avoided.

Related to homesickness is the concept of 'Persephone syndrome' derived from the Greek mythology of Persephone. Dunkas and Nikelly (1972) first used the term 'Persephone syndrome' after studying Greek women living in the United States with their husbands who would become unwell if they did not visit and live with their mothers in Greece intermittently while married to their husbands. Without such visits, these Greek women may be hospitalised with emotional perplexity, sleeplessness and anxiety (Dunkas & Nikelly, 1972, p. 213), whereas Persephone syndrome is about the longing a Greek daughter has for her mother, homesickness is the anguish experienced by people who move from their house or home. Unlike homesickness and Persephone syndrome, cognitive immobility is a stressful experience of cognitive entrapment at a single or

multiple locations; those suffering from it may yearn for places they have visited or lived in, which may be different from where they call home. For those who experience it, cognitive immobility is not a walk in the park. Mental simulations of the past that are connected to actual events are mentally challenging (Berger et al., 1974, p. 77; van Boven et al., 2009, p. 136), and require more mental effort than episodic imagination (van Boven et al., 2009). As a result, cognitive immobility requires more effort and is more stressful than cognitive migration. The efforts to reclaim the trapped mind through episodic memory processes exacerbate the suffering of those experiencing cognitive immobility. Even though, it has been argued that memory can be an alternative treatment for the pathologies of modern life (Huyssen, 2010, p. 6).

This phenomenon is not unique to me. According to a PhD student who was stranded in her home country, Vietnam, due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, she felt she had dual living spaces in Vietnam and New Zealand and a sense of confusion and frustrations of belonging to places and spaces in both countries at the same time (Phan, 2022, p. 7), which I argue is cognitive immobility. In their study of Polish construction workers in Norway, Erdal and Ezzati (2015, p. 1207) observed that the 'men described their position as similar to that of sailors: temporary sojourners always returning to port, but leaving again each time'. According to the authors, the conditions in which these workers found themselves were created by a lack of personal and professional possibilities. I will also argue that these individuals were experiencing cognitive immobility. Their situation is due to the *absence* or *presence* of specific personal or external conditions in Norway or Poland. Numerous additional individuals are experiencing cognitive immobility. In contemporary society more people are uprooted from their native homes and '... no succeeding milieu succeeds in becoming a truly "home" either' (Berger et al., 1974, p. 165). This argument encapsulates my predicament; no *home* is truly a *home*; even the previous *home* – the *ancestral home* – has lost its distinguishing features and allure.

Recognizing and encouraging research on cognitive immobility could expand our understanding of the mental feelings and experiences that those who have moved or visited a location have for that location. For now, this is an area that has received insufficient scholarly attention in migration studies. As previously stated, increasing our understanding of cognitive immobility will require a methodological and conceptual integration of cognitive neuroscience and social sciences, as well as cross-disciplinary collaborations (Vari-Lavoisier, 2019, 2021). This approach will significantly advance our understanding of *the homeless mind in a mobile world*. I argue for the inclusion of cognitive immobility in migration research. *Mobility facilitated my cognitive immobility, which necessitates the conditions for increased mobility.* Those who do not experience cognitive immobility may lack the same level of motivation to mobilise as those who do. I will suggest that cognitive immobility may motivate those who have moved to aspire for changes in their ancestral homes' social, economic and political circumstances. Research on cognitive immobility may aid in an in-depth understanding of migration-related issues such as migrant transnationalism and voluntary return migration. For instance, studies could investigate whether cognitive immobility is linked to migrant transnationalism and violent democracies (Pérez-Armendáriz, 2021) or migrant transnationalism and development (Erdal, 2022) to enhance our knowledge of human (im)mobility.

This article has established that my *mobility* and the socio-cultural forces at work in the *places* I lived and visited and my relationships and interactions with the *people* I met contributed to my cognitive immobility and helped shape my personhood – *the homeless mind in a mobile world*.

## Conclusion

This article used an autoethnographic approach to connect the author's experiences, beliefs and identities, as well as insights from neuroscience and social psychology, to facilitate an understanding of a phenomenon in migration studies that has received insufficient attention: cognitive immobility. Unlike the majority of studies, which have concentrated on the cognitive migratory experiences of those contemplating relocation from their current locations, this article examined the migration experiences of someone who has relocated, as well as the mental connection he has to places he has lived and visited.

This article argues that cognitive immobility encompasses not only a yearning for a *home* left behind but also for a *tourist* or *visitor destination*, as well as the sense of stressful mental entrapment which is associated with the creative reconstruction of time spent in such locations, including the sights, sounds, smells and people associated with those locations. Additionally, it suggested that recognising and conducting research on cognitive immobility would help us better understand specific topical migration issues. It calls for research on how cognitive immobility affects people's mobility. Identifying the phases of cognitive immobility could broaden our understanding of this phenomenon. Future studies could investigate the causes of cognitive immobility and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cognitive immobility in people.

### Acknowledgements

I appreciate Dr Thomas Stubbs' thoughtful feedback on an earlier version of the article. I am indebted to the two anonymous reviewers. I thank the first reviewer for the insightful comments and recommendations and the second reviewer for the suggestions and contributions, which helped refine the notion of cognitive immobility. I also appreciate the support of Dr Antara Datta, Dr Janina Beiser-McGraththe, Obi Emelonye, Rex Obano, editor-in-chief, associate editor, and the editorial staff. Stay blessed.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## Notes

1. This poem was written on October 26th, 2021, on a flight from London via Istanbul to Abuja over the Sahara Desert. Olariche Olumba was three years old.
2. I concur that the term migrant is flawed and has become politicised (Sirkeci & Cohen, 2016, p. 383) and also it has '… become a toxic term that should be abandoned because it stigmatizes people labelled as such' (Scheel & Tazzioli, 2022, p. 2). I will use it sparingly and only when no other term will suffice.
3. It can be translated as '*the wealth brought back to the village speaks for itself*'.

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