Where Do I Belong? An autoethnographic musings on Cognitive (im)mobility

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January 26, 2022

Abstract

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ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic article explores the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of an individual living abroad but cognitively imprisoned at his ancestral home. This article discusses the concept of cognitive migration as advanced by researchers and draws on it and the author’s own experiences and feelings to introduce and explain the concept of cognitive immobility. It exemplifies the dialectical conflict between the aspirations of longing and the emotions of belonging for a place and the desire to remain distant from it. This article advocates the recognition of this cognitive experience of being cognitively trapped in an area while mobilised in-person elsewhere in migration studies. It provides a lens to view such migration experiences that have received inadequate attention and contributes to the growing body of knowledge regarding the cognitive migration processes and experiences of those contemplating or participating in human mobility.

Keywords: cognitive (im)mobility, autoethnography, migrant transnationalism, international migration, identity, memory.

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.11This poem was written on October 26th, 2021, on a flight from London via Istanbul to Abuja over the Sahara desert. Olariche was three years old.

I shrugged at the prospect of scribbling my thoughts while seated in the massive aircraft en route to Abuja. However, despite the enormous 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 her 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.

Migration scholars appear to agree that migration is a complex phenomenon that can be studied using various theoretical frameworks (Schewel 2020; Massey et al. 1993; De Haas, 2021). Most migration research has focused on mobility, namely why people move, how they move, and other processes associated with movement (Esparza et al. 2020; Czaika and Kis-Katos 2009; De Haas 2010; Zolberg 1989; Bohra-Mishra and Massey 2011; Hager 2021; Appadurai 1996). Others focused on what happens throughout the voyage and transit, as well as what happens after arriving at a desirable or undesirable destination, and even upon return (Berriane 2020; Gross-Wyrzten 2020; Iranzo 2021; Koser 1997; Bourbeau 2015; Haugen 2012; Veale and Andres 2014; Flahaux 2017; de Haas, Fokkema, and Fihri 2015). And recently, on immobility (Carling 2002; Schewel 2020; Martin and Bergmann 2021; Barcus and Werner 2017; Conrad Suso 2020). Most migration researchers concentrate on cross-border rather than internal movements (Ortiga and Macabasag 2020; King and Skeldon 2010). Another strand of migration scholarship is emerging, focusing on mental travel at the nexus of cognition and migration rather than in-person movement.

This article discusses the cognitive migration experiences and thoughts of a London-based doctoral researcher who engages in ‘mental journeys into the past’ (Suddendorf and Corballis, 2007, 301), manifested by the reexperience 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 this strand of migration literature that focuses on cognitive migration processes – like cognitive imaginations – of would-be travellers/migrants 22I concur that the term migrant is flawed and has become politicised (Sirkeci and Cohen 2016, 383); I will use it sparingly and only when no other term will suffice. (Van Naerssen and Van der Velde 2015; Koikkalainen and Kyle 2016; Koikkalainen, Kyle, and Nykänen 2020; Conrad Suso 2020; Cangià and Zittoun 2020; Thompson 2017; Kyle and Koikkalainen 2011; Horst 2006; Rawlence 2016).

This body of literature explains the thresholds and phases in the decision-making process that those who wish to move to other places must engage in before moving (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett 2016; Van Naerssen and Van der Velde 2015; van der Velde and van Naerssen 2011) and how would-be movers visualise the places they wish to travel to including their future social lives in those places (Koikkalainen and Kyle 2016). This sort of migratory phenomenon whereby our minds travel ahead of our bodies (Koikkalainen and Kyle 2016, 770) has been referred to as ‘mental journeys’ (Cangià and Zittoun 2020); ‘geographical imaginations’ (Thompson 2017); ‘cognitive migration’ (Koikkalainen, Kyle, and Nykänen 2020; Koikkalainen and Kyle 2016; Kyle and Koikkalainen 2011); ‘nerves syndrome’ (Conrad Suso 2020) and ‘Buufis’ (Horst 2006; Rawlence 2016). So far, the literature offers an insufficient understanding and conceptualization of the cognitive migration experiences and feelings associated with revisiting a place one has previously lived or visited.

The majority of this research focused on the cognitive imaginations and imaginaries of would-be travellers while ignoring those who have already travelled, leaving unanswered the question of whether people or those who have moved engage in imaginative travel back to places they have previously lived or visited. Thus, the migration bias that occurs in the field of migration studies (Schewel 2020) appears to extend to this strand
of research, resulting in a lack of attention, if not outright disregard, of the cognitive migration experiences and processes of people who have visited or lived in a location.

This article aims to address this issue by using autoethnographic methods to investigate and conceptualise this type of cognitive migration experience and thoughts, drawing on the author’s personal experiences, neuroscience, and social psychology. Understanding and conceptualising the process and experiences of how people’s minds can return to places and areas where they have lived or visited without their bodies could provide 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.

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 my relationships (family and friends) in the United Kingdom and Nigeria, shape 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.

Recently, studies are calling for more research on the connectedness of cognition and migration (Vari-Lavoisier 2019; Vari-Lavoisier and Fiske 2021; Koikkalainen and Kyle 2016; Kyle and Koikkalainen 2011). 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 that could offer in-depth knowledge and broaden the scope of cognitive and social sciences (Vari-Lavoisier and Fiske 2021; Kyle and Koikkalainen 2011, 7). This 'cognitive turn' approach will involve examining people’s imagined mobile or immobile futures to better understand several current migration phenomena (Vari-Lavoisier and Kyle 2016, 771). Vari-Lavoisier (2019, 1) argues adopting a socio-cognitive perspective on migration will aid in clarifying thought processes in relation to broader sociocultural contexts. This call for a cognitive turn and cross-disciplinary collaboration among scholars in the cognitive and social sciences echoes Massey and colleagues’ 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, 432).

This article responds to such calls by conceptualising this phenomenon of the mind travelling ahead of the body in retrospect to foreground it within migration studies. By doing so, it contributes to the literature on how people engage cognitively in migration, particularly after they have arrived at their optimal or non-optimal destination or are in transit. This paper will be among the first to examine this phenomenon in this context, which the author and possibly many others, particularly those who live across international borders, are experiencing.

The article will discuss the research methods adopted and some existing literature on how people cognitively participate in migration. It will also examine 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 will be adequately expounded and conceptualised. It concludes with a call for increased scholarly attention to migration issues at the intersection of cognition and (im)mobility.

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, 12–13); this is a sin I am willing to commit. According to Duckart (2005), as cited by Chang (2008, 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, 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 (T. E. Adams, Ellis, and Jones 2015, 37). Among the research methods, there is none like autoethnography.

Autoethnography is better explained by citing three scholars whose work I admire. First of all, Deborah E. Reed-Danahay (1997, 9) wrote that:

Autoethnography is defined as a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text.

And Carolyn Ellis (2020, 3):

As an autoethnographer, I am both the author and focus of the story, the one who tells and the one who experiences, the observer and the observed, the creator and the created. I am the person at the intersection of the personal and the cultural, thinking and observing as an ethnographer and writing and describing as a storyteller.

Then Norman K. Denzin (2013, 124):

I want to turn the autoethnographic project into a critical, performative practice, a practice that begins with the biography of the writer and moves outward to culture, discourse, history, and ideology.

Each of these definitions contains elements that interest me. While Reed-Danahay (1997) defines autoethnography as a research method that focuses on how self-narratives emerge in a social context, Ellis (2020) simplifies it by arguing that the author is both the researcher and the subject of the study, and Denzin (2013), 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. It has been argued that the validity and generalisability of autoethnographic research are determined by the work’s ability to elicit realistic, true-to-life, and conceivable experiences that readers can relate to themselves or others they know (Carolyn Ellis 1999, 674).

Thus, this article is based on a research method that connects my emotions, experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and identities to a broader cultural, social, and political context by using reflexivity to provide an insider’s perspective on practises, meanings, and interpretations of cultural experiences to foster the understanding and critique of a way of life and generate new nuances in how to view it (T. E. Adams, Ellis, and Jones 2015).

The majority of the data came from my study journal, thoughts jotted down in the ColorNote app on my phone, and the reexperiences I am continually having.

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 to migrate and why migrating or not is the best course of action (van der Velde and Van Naerssen 2011; Van Naerssen and 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 (van der Velde and van Naerssen 2011; Van Naerssen and Van der Velde 2015; Hagen-Zanker and Mallett 2016). The mental threshold was categorised as the first stage of cognitive migration (Hagen-Zanker and 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 pre-actional 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 (Koikkalainen and Kyle 2016; Kyle and Koikkalainen 2011; Conrad Suso 2020; Rawlence 2016; Horst 2006; Thompson 2017; Cangia and Zittoun 2020).

*Mental journey* was described as the move to a new possible location, identities, and life outcomes, with or without physical movement (Cangia and Zittoun 2020, 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 imaginations are relational in nature (Thompson 2017, 79). Concepts such as mental journey, nerves syndrome, buufis, and cognitive migration do not account for what geographical imaginations do; it includes the cognitive travels and imaginations of those who have already moved, whereas the rest of these concepts place a premium on *movement* or *aspirations to move*.

*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, 143–44). According to Horst (2006, 152), ‘... buufis as a form of collective imagination provides hope in quite a hopeless situation’. *Nerves syndrome* was coined from the findings of a study conducted in the Gambia. It is used to describe a sense of entrapment and frustration, as well as an incessant daydreaming about migrating to foreign lands and eventually returning home as a success story (Conrad Suso 2020, 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 (Rawlence 2016, 183; Conrad Suso 2020, 189).

David Jané Kyle and Saara Koikkalainen proposed the notion of cognitive migration (Kyle and Koikkalainen 2011). They argue that many migrants ‘... actively imagine themselves socially and emotionally in a particular place in the future–days, weeks, or months before [we] actually “decide” to physically migrate. *That is, quite often our minds have migrated many times before our bodies do so*’ (Kyle and Koikkalainen 2011, 7). They defined cognitive migration as 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 and Kyle 2016, 767). Empirical findings suggest that would-be travellers, before reaching their optimal destinations, engage in cognitive migration to places far from their present environment, imagining a future where they study, work, marry, and live in comfortable conditions with their families (Koikkalainen, Kyle, and Nykänen 2020, 64).

This article will henceforth use the term cognitive migration over *buufis* or *nerves syndrome*, amongst others, in describing the phenomenon of people cognitively travelling to new locations, as it is more analytically feasible. So far, the focus has been on would-be movers’ cognitive migration processes while ignoring those who have already relocated or visited a location. Thus, drawing on personal experiences and feelings, I foreground a phenomenon that has received insufficient attention in migration research; prior to that, I discuss the role of imagination and memory in migration, drawing on research from cognitive neuroscience and social psychology, among other disciplines.

**Episodic Imagination/Memory and Migration**

While 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, 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, Miller, and Castles 2020, 23).

There have been calls for terms like migration and migrant to be avoided due to their politicisation and judgmental connotation, and instead movers and mobility should be used; and ‘describing migration as mobility captures the dynamic nature of movement and defines two-way flows’ (Sirkeci and Cohen 2016, 383). 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 and Zittoun 2020, 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, over a while, or across generations (Schewel 2020, 329).

Previously, scholars have lamented the overemphasis on mobility in migration studies, which has resulted in the undue focus on migration processes associated with moving while overlooking those who stay put (Schewel 2020; Stockdale and Haartsen 2018; Smets 2019). However, it appears as though the tide is changing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. More research is focusing on immobility, particularly as it relates to migration (Martin and Bergmann 2021; Freudendal-Pedersen and Kesselring 2021; McIntyre, Negra, and O’Leary 2021; O’Brien and Eger 2021); immobility has become mainstream in the education sector (Cairns et al. 2021, 885). We now witness a ‘... reduced aspirations and a form of voluntary immobility seldom seen in society’ (Martin and Bergmann 2021, 669).

While someone’s mobility is contingent on another’s immobility (Mata-Codesal 2015, 2283), it appears as though my mobility has also resulted in my immobility. 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. While 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. According to neuroscience and social psychology, that’s me engaging in cognitive recollection, a memory-related process.

Memory refers to a field of study and the neurocognitive capacity for encoding, storing, and retrieving information; a notional store for information; the information contained in that store; a process of information retrieval; and a person’s consciousness of recollecting things (E. 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). This article agrees with the notion that memory is ‘the reexperience of an experience’. Conscious memory can be divided into semantic memory and episodic memory (Corballis 2019, 1).

Episodic memories relate to those reexperiences or mental reconstructions of personal events that took place in the past (Endel Tulving 1985; Corballis 2019, 1; Michaelian, Perrin, and Sant’Anna 2020); whereas, semantic memories are the faculty that allow people to remember basic knowledge (Michaelian, Perrin, and Sant’Anna 2020; Corballis 2019, 1); for example, when one remembers that ‘Ottawa is the capital of Canada’ (Michaelian, Perrin, and Sant’Anna 2020, 293). 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 and Corballis 2007, 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, Kane, and McGraw 2009, 133). Because episodic memory is reconstructive (Van-Boven, Kane, and McGraw 2009; K. Szpunar and McDermott 2009), such reconstructions may differ from what occurred due to susceptibility to distortion (Van-Boven, Kane, and McGraw 2009, 133; Thomas Suddendorf and Corballis 2007, 5). Nonetheless, many people have reexperiences associated with episodic memory (Corballis 2019; Endel Tulving 1985). 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 and Addis 2007; Suddendorf and Corballis 2007) and semantic knowledge (Klein 2013; Szpunar 2010). The connectedness of episodic memory and human (im)mobility is an area that deserves more scholarly attention.
within the field of migration research.

Episodic imagination is a term that can be associated with cognitive migration. In recent years, travels to areas not virtually experienced by imaginaries of such places are hardly conducted (Salazar 2011, 577); travel does not have to be a physical geographical change; it can also be imagined (Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1974, 72). According to Michaelian, Perrin, and Sant’Anna (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). Countereffactual 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 and McDermott 2009, 125).

Despites the differences in episodic memory and episodic imagination, according to research, remembering the past and simulating future events require the ability to recall the past (Schacter, Addis, and Buckner 2008, 42; Szpunar and McDermott 2009, 123; De Nardi et al. 2020, 5); both cognitive travels stimulate the same areas of the brain (Suddendorf and Corballis 2007). 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 (Szpunar and McDermott 2009; Schacter and Addis 2020). In a study that used positron emission tomography (PET) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), it was found that several regions in the brain’s posterior cortex – superior occipital cortex, posterior cingulate cortex, and medial temporal lobes – were similarly engaged during personal past and future thoughts but not during the control task (Szpunar and McDermott 2009, 124). The control task required participants to imagine former U.S. president Bill Clinton (Szpunar and McDermott 2009, 124). In the control task, the capacity to answer questions was derived from semantic memory. Thus, cognitive migration is dependent on episodic memory; in other words, no one can engage in cognitive migration without inputs from episodic memory.

So far, migration research has concentrated on how individuals use their episodic memory and semantic knowledge base to engage in episodic imagination, which some refer to as ‘episodic future thoughts’ (Szpunar 2010) and others as ‘cognitive migration’ (Koikkalainen and Kyle 2016). As a result, the migration literature has drawn upon this area to develop ideas and concepts for explaining cognitive migration processes and experiences. 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 re-experience events, particularly sights, sounds, and smells from past episodes.

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, 297; Mata-Codesal 2015, 2286) and that ’mobility and immobility are two sides of the same coin’ and should only be distinguished for analytical considerations (Salazar 2016, 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. It will be defined in subsequent sections. 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 England. 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, 406 italics in original). It is certain that this place has not remained static nor some aspects of my identity. 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. 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, 41).

As is evident, 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 and Orbe 2014, 29; Hecht et al. 2003, 41); whether it is an individual or collective identity, a 'natural' identity does not exist (Agius and Keep 2018, 5). 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 rivo ulo okwuo onye kpara ya' maxim (Obunike 2016; Okwuosa, Nwaoga, and Uroko 2021; Okonkwo and Obi-Ani 2020) and the concept of Ahamefuna (Okwuosa, Nwaoga, and Uroko 2021). 'Aku rivo 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, Nwaoga, and Uroko 2021, 7). ‘As the individual derives his or her identity from the community, in Igboland, communal success overrides individual success’; this is an idea that the Igbos demonstrated by rebuilding towns and infrastructures destroyed in Igbo land by Nigerian troops with ultra-modern ones immediately following the Nigeria-Biafra civil war (Okwuosa, Nwaoga, and Uroko 2021, 8).

The maxim of 'aku rivo 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 outside the ancestral home. 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.

The pogrom of over 30,000 people from the Eastern region of Nigeria – mainly the Igbo – and the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war led to the forced migration of Igbo people and others living in other parts of Nigeria back to their villages (Smith 2014; Forsyth 1969). 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 rivo ulo okwuo onye kpara ya’ maxim in Igbo land and among the Igbos in the post-war era. Many of those displaced back to the region who had houses in other parts of Nigeria but no homes in 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' military decree known as the "Abandoned Property Decree" was used to seize properties owned by the Igbo people who abandoned them at the onset of the civil war. Most never got their properties back, enacted in some parts of Nigeria, many lost their homes and properties to other ethnic groups, mainly their neighbours, upon returning to their former place of abode (Chukwuezi 2001, 56; Okwuosa, Nwaoga, and Uroko 2021, 4). It is now customary for the Igbo people to build houses in their villages before constructing the ones they will live in wherever they reside outside of their villages; as a result, there are thousands of uninhabited mansions in Igbo land today. Thus, I agree with the notion that identity is a unifying and divisive force that spreads its tentacles throughout social, cultural, and political interactions, and conflicts, wars over resources, and issues of inequality, exclusion, and belonging are all predicated on identity (Agius and Keep 2018, 1).
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. As a result, my identity and memories are inextricably linked to these places. Our understanding of place and identity is rooted in our memories (De Nardi et al. 2020, 3).

Memory is the reliving of previous events in our lives (Klein 2015). Reliving previous events, for me, can be pleasurable but most often it is difficult to deal with when you always have to reexperience events and people in places different from where you are currently in.

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 enough distractions to such thoughts. After completing the first semester examinations, I bought a plane ticket and went home; which was a heavy relief. While at home, I had no such thoughts of home again but was engrossed in the daily living and activities common back home.

Being in my ancestral home makes it possible for me to be among my people in the village, a truly rural area with a serene natural environment surrounded by relatives and friends, where communal life is the norm and people are not said to intrude when they come to you unannounced or venture into your well-being without your permission. I also enjoy the rotating village markets, particularly the Eke-Isu market, where I purchase succulent, sweet, and fresh fruits plucked from trees in people’s backyards and the surrounding wild forest.

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, my late father’s bosom friend. I will pause for a moment to consider the fruits I purchase from my elderly lady friend at the village market, whose neighbour’s ‘natural’ palm wine, plucked from the palm wine 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 four 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 at the University of London.

While 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. When we had our daughter, Olariche, the yearning for my ancestral home became intense. To alleviate the stress caused by my emotions and longing for my ancestral home, the only option available to me was an in-person visit. However, immediately upon arrival at my ancestral home, I will yearn to return to London, my adopted home. I experience what Cangia and Zittoun (2020, 646) described as a feeling of ‘... an ambivalent condition between not being anymore (there) and not being yet (here) ’. This is more 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, Berger, and Kellner 1974, 77). Thus, unlike in Germany, I will yearn to be back with my family in London while at my ancestral home, and upon my return to London, I will long to be back at my ancestral home; generating this sense of homelessness which resonates with the argument that ‘modern man has suffered from a deepening condition of ‘homelessness’.(Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1974, 77).

This feeling, which I have been experiencing for several years, contrasts with what Koikkalainen and Kyle (2016, 770) refer to as ‘cognitive migration’, a term used to describe the migratory phase during which the mind travels ahead of the body. I will refer to the reexperiences of my mind travelling back to places I had
been in the past as cognitive immobility. 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 (Van-Boven, Kane, and McGraw 2009, 136; Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1974, 77), and require more mental effort than cognitive imagination (Van-Boven, Kane, and McGraw 2009). As a result, cognitive immobility requires more effort and is more stressful than cognitive migration.

Broadly, **cognitive immobility** can be defined as a mind-wandering process in which a person’s mind travels into previously lived or visited areas, drawing on episodic memory to recreate mental simulations of scenes, smells, sounds, and sights from those past encounters with or without cognitive control over the mind. It is a stage in the migratory process in which people or movers engage in mental simulations that allow them to relive the sights, sounds, smells, and people they encountered in places they previously lived or visited. Cognitive immobility refers to the mental trips our minds take back to places and locations we have lived in and visited in the past, either consciously or unconsciously, for a brief or extended period, and can result in stressful feelings that affect our emotional and behavioural patterns.

The place or location could be a spatial environment that someone used to call home, a tourist site, or other venues. This sense of cognitive immobility, which results in a longing for the place and subsequent reexperience of past events, can be triggered by either pleasant or upsetting memories. Memories can be pleasant; however, some may not be treasured (De-Nardi et al. 2020, 5). Individuals experience cognitive immobility when they are unable to remain in the location they desire due to the absence or presence of certain restrictions or circumstances beyond their control, which may originate in either their current or desired location.

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 by 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, Vingerhoets, and Van Heck 1996, 899). This definition emphasises the aspirations for a place and asserts that homesickness is a disease. Additionally, homesickness has been defined as ‘... as that longing or desire for return to a rooted place, relying on the recurring memory of lived experience’ (Bryan 2005, 44). A longing which agree that ‘in-person visits’ or surfing the web for home news can help alleviate homesickness (Nakajima 2019, 3451; Morse and Mudgett 2017, 101). 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 reexperience about a place may preclude us from having an in-person visit; visiting can exacerbate our emotional pain and should therefore be avoided.

While cognitive immobility is also a yearning for a home, in contrast to homesickness, it encompasses the deliberate or conscious effort of mentally simulating the reexperience of past events in a home lived in or a site visited. It encompasses both the burning desire for a home left behind and the aspiration for places visited as tourists or visitors. I will argue that cognitive immobility encompasses homesickness plus the mental processes of reliving past episodes of the sights, sounds, smells, and people of places lived or visited in the past.

According to my experience, the intensity, frequency, and rate at which I experience cognitive immobility for places I have lived or visited are not comparable to that for my ancestral home. Though I lived in Germany for over four years and did reexperience my days at the *Studentenwohnheim* 33College hostel for undergraduate students. in Dussern Strasse with my friends and colleagues, including the good and bad times we shared, not to mention the delicious food I used to eat at the food market on the top floor of the Limbecker Platz in Essen, nonetheless, the extent to which I yearn for my ancestral home is beyond comprehension and incomparable.

This 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, a sense of belonging to places and spaces in both countries (Phan 2022, 7), which I will argue is cognitive immobility. ‘I constantly felt as if I was both here and there, which was because I was uncertain about the possibility of returning to New Zealand’ (Phan 2022, 5). Numerous additional individuals may be 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, Berger, and Kellner 1974, 165). This argument encapsulates my situation; 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, 7; Vari-Lavoisier and Fiske 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. Cognitive immobility, in my experience, creates the conditions for mobility; those who are not experiencing cognitive immobility may lack the same level of motivation to mobilise as those who are. I will suggest that cognitive immobility may motivate those who have moved to change the political circumstances of their ancestral homes and promote social mobilisation therein. 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, whether cognitive immobility is linked to migrant transnationalism and violent democracies (P´erez-Armend´ariz 2021) or migrant transnationalism and development (Erdal 2022).

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.

Cognitive immobility is defined in this article as the mental journeys our minds take back to places we have lived or visited in the past by reliving, consciously or unconsciously, the events and activities in which we participated, as well as the people and other things we encountered.

This article argues that cognitive immobility is more than homesickness, as it encompasses not only a yearning for a home left behind but also for a tourist or visitor destination, as well as the reexperience of time spent in such locations, including the reexperiencing of 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 current migration issues – such as migrant transnationalism and return migration – and how this phenomenon affects human mobility. It calls for research on how cognitive immobility affects people’s mobility. Identifying the phases of cognitive immobility or immobility, in general, could broaden our understanding of this phenomenon. Future research could examine the factors that contribute to cognitive immobility, for example, the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on people’s cognitive immobility.

References


