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## Migration and Experience in the Twenty First Century: A Comparative Analysis of Some Selected Works of Chinenye Emelogu, Ato Arinze and Cosmas Mbawuike

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### Abstract

Most daily experiences are often documented by the visual artist. These may be expressed in the form of material or spoken word. Though it is believed that contemporary sculpture talks about the idea of a certain issue or event, less emphasis is placed on material. This paper merges both the material and materiality of the medium of expression in the twenty first century. Artists are seen to be the hidden voice of the voiceless. The Nigerian society is challenged by the dearth of basic infrastructure and social amenities. When people begin to migrate to Western countries in search of greener pastures, artists embody this exodus in the form of artworks. The Western World is gradually making new findings to better the life of their peoples. Africa, on the other hand, though blessed with rich human and natural resources, remains systemically impoverished by their leaders. This self-inflicted phenomenon drains the mind and consciousness of the individual, driving him or her to desire to escape from the continent. Plato believes that in desiring, we attempt to respond appropriately to the detection of value in the world. However, visual artists deprecate these societal ills, by expressing them in various media, thereby becoming the voice of the masses. It is believed that a photograph speaks a thousand words. This paper seeks to expose the ordeal faced by the Nigerian migrants in the twenty-first century using the sculptural works of three artists.

Keywords: human experiences, migrations, art, sculpture, Nigeria

## Introduction

Art creation does not come in a vacuum. It is always believed that for one to produce art, the artist must have relayed his personal experience. Although some artists argue that their works are usually not inspired by any event or occurrences, they just create art, but experience, as it is always said, comes from personal encounters. Mattick (2003) is of the view that art cannot reveal the truth about art without snatching it away again by turning the revelation into an artistic event. Thus, creative ideas are transformed into visual metaphors. Scholars like McEvilley (1999) believe that in contemporary art, especially in the area of sculpture, emphasis is being shifted from tangible materials of art to spoken word, meaning that the figure of speech is used to refer to something that it may not literally denote in order to suggest its similarity. Contemporary sculpture incorporates different object as raw material for actualizing artistic images. Unlike the classical usage, contemporary sculptors make use of objects around them. These objects can come from the air we breathe, organic and inorganic materials, and animate objects. Human beings may sometimes form part of installations when mounting an exhibition. Thus, current artistic practice many a time uses everyday objects, some of which are discarded, particularly materials which cannot be recycled for their original purpose. According to Encarta (2009), a found object would at times involve some degree of modification, not to the extent that it cannot be recognized.

Presently, critics prefer to use the term ‘recycled art’. Artists have been salvaging materials from car parts to kitchen utensils for decades, for incorporation into sculptures, paintings, drawings, and collages. Recycled art can be seen as a product of the process of mental engagement, observation, and calculation with the object, whereby the artist transforms these materials into physical and tangible art form. In terms of representing nature, artists are the true presenters of the world, because they replicate it the way they see it. This also means that the original idea can be altered in such a way that one is able to see through the eyes of the artist. However, these personal experiences are rendered and interpreted metaphorically by visual artists both positively and negatively. Positive experiences are represented by happiness, satisfaction and the ability to take care about

basic needs. Negative experiences on the other hand include hunger, bitterness, hardship, dearth of basic amenities and others. These negative experiences eventually necessitate migration to developed countries in search of greener pastures.

### **The rationale behind lifestyle migration**

The artist of our time feels compelled to work more for bread than honour. His or her artwork is at the mercy of its purchaser, who may choose to display it in positions quite unsuitable for proper viewing. The artist is also more or less required by pressures of earning a livelihood to depend on the practical techniques he has picked up in his apprenticeship rather than engaging in rigorous research and experimentations. Consequently, the quest for perfection and aesthetic gratification is at peril (Mattick, 2003).

The chronic brew of war in Africa, corruption and poverty have stolen more than just food and shelter from our people, they have also taken their ability to dream and hope for a better future within the shores of Africa. So they do not flee and migrate out of the continent only because they need to find a job, they flee more so because there is no hope in sight that they will ever find it at home. Therefore, faced with such hopeless situations at home, they willingly step into a rickety boat that just drowned some of their friends in the Mediterranean on a suicidal journey to Europe. To buttress the above, the world encyclopedia states that human migrations have affected the grand epochs in history, changing forever the demographic landscape of countries throughout the world, bringing, on some occasions, innovation and mutual benefits, and on others destruction and suffering. Human migration has taken place at all times and in the greatest variety of circumstances. Causes of migrations have been climatic, political, economic, religious, or simply for love of adventure. Scholars like Conradson (2005) refer to it as life style migration. He states that “the term ‘lifestyle migration’ has been used to refer to an increasing number of people who take the decision to migrate based on their belief that there is a more fulfilling way of life available to them elsewhere.” McIntyre (2009) is of the opinion that lifestyle migration is a voluntary relocation to places that are perceived as providing an enhanced or, at least, different lifestyle.’

Conradson and Latham (2005) describe the motivations behind such migratory moves as self-realization involving self-exploration and self-development, with career advancement only a distant secondary concern, enabled by wider economic and political conditions. However, not all lifestyle migrants retain their original citizenship and not all maintain regular transnational family, social, financial or professional ties. Many officially change their domicile, clearly intending to live their professional and personal life ‘elsewhere’ indefinitely (Salazar, 2014).

Scholars like O’Reilly and Benson (2009) on the contrary, are of the opinion that lifestyle migrants are people who are relatively affluent. This does not necessarily mean they are rich, but neither are they migrating as a result of poverty or economic hardship. In many cases, they move from countries that are economically stronger like the US or France, to countries that have relatively weaker economies like Mexico or Morocco. Lifestyle migrants can be any age, but they tend, on average, to be older and many are retired or semi-retired. They sometimes move permanently and sometimes only semi-permanently, to their new or second homes. However, they are migrants, not tourists. The main reason lifestyle migrants move is to improve their quality of life. Lifestyle migration is difficult to define, as most migrants are searching for a better way of life. Apart from lifestyle migration, labour migration, asylum seeking, and forced migration are other forms of migration. However, all these forms of migration have some things in common, for example the search for ‘good life’ which eludes the migrant in his country. They are drawn to what they describe as the slow pace of life, a cheaper cost of living and low property prices, a healthy climate, freedom from the pressures of modern living, and a strong sense of community. The migrant often condemns his home country for its fast pace of life, high crime-rates, grayness, cold, damp, and poor quality of life, and many believe that by moving away, they are escaping the “rat race”. They are people who have made a conscious choice not only about how to live but also about where to live (Hoey, 2005).

Migrants consistently give lifestyle as a major reason for undertaking the move abroad (O’Reilly, 2007). Social scientists argue that there are two major factors that are responsible for human migration, and these include the pull and push factors. The push factor makes people want to leave

where they are, while the pull factors are those factors that make people want to go to some specific region or country. Let us examine the push and pull factors in the specific aspects of people migrating from underdeveloped to developed countries for greener pastures. The push factors here result mostly from economic and political decisions. In many developing countries such as Nigeria, few economic opportunities allow people to live the sort of life that they want. At other times, the political situation leads to instability and upheaval that make people flee from their homes in a bid to remain safe.

The quest for the right kind of lifestyle can be argued, then, to be an integral part of the late-modern social world. In short, this argument implies that since it is now up to individuals to construct their own sense of identity, choosing and engaging in an appropriate kind of lifestyle that makes a statement about who one is or wants to be is a central part of contemporary life. Choosing a place to live which is seen to fit with other lifestyle practices is of crucial importance (Sweetman, 2003). This may be why Omoregbe (1993) stated that man and his interests are the sole determinants of the good and bad in the universe. It can also be said that man's joys and pleasures are what count in the world for it is only man who interrogates nature and can radically adjust it to suit himself. Since he is the one whose interpretations count and who tries to describe the environment, his consideration is what ultimately matters in the world. It is in consideration of good living and better life that man looks and yearns for comfort.

Bello (2015) narrates a story about a young man named Hakeem Bello, a Nigerian, who was fleeing the Arab Springs of Libya in search of a better life:

“The boy next to me fell to the floor and for a moment I didn't know if he had fainted or was dead – then I saw that he was covering his eyes so he didn't have to see the waves any more. A pregnant woman vomited and started screaming. Below deck, people were shouting that they couldn't breathe, so the men in charge of the boat went down and started beating them. By the time we saw a rescue helicopter, two days after our boat had left Libya with 250 passengers on board, some people were already dead – flung into the sea by the waves, or

suffocated downstairs in the dark. It's very difficult for me to think about this, nearly four years after I paid a smuggler to get me out of Libya, but it's important for people to understand what is happening to us and why."

Every year, thousands like him leave Africa, many through illegal means. Between 2000 and 2005, an estimated 440,000 people per year emigrated from Africa, most of them to Europe (International Organization for Migration, 2008). Many of them have similar harrowing experiences; some never made it to their destination. Yet, at the edge of Libya today, thousands are still camped hoping to make a similar journey.

Migration has been a part of civilization. It is a force that shaped the socio-cultural climate of every civilization on earth. Therefore, for Africa, migration is not a recent phenomenon (Wuyts, 2011). However, the migration of Africans in recent years has been unprecedented given the number of people leaving and the risk that they take in trying to leave the continent. The number of migrants from Africa has seen some decline in recent years. Experts applaud the humanitarian effort of Europe for the decline. However, there are reports that thousands are still camped in Libya waiting to make the dangerous crossing. A more ominous fact is that the cloud of hopelessness and the dream-strangling atmosphere created by years of poor governance is thickening in several African countries. For instance, both Cameroun and Nigeria are facing waves of violence. South Africa is presently embroiled in accusations of corruption and mismanagement of public funds.

If the average African can't wake up to the hope that he will succeed if he works hard, that his children will not face war and violence and that the works of his hands will not be swept away suddenly, then again squeezed out of hope, many more will journey to foreign lands in the hope that there they may be able to dream there. People have cited poverty, unemployment, and other such factors as the reason for the mass efflux (Ouche, 2015, Atkins, 2009). Basic human needs cannot just be summarized as food, shelter and clothing. Humans need more than these to see life as worth living. We need to love and be loved, we need to believe, to hope and to dream. As abstract as these may seem, a man starved of them tends to wither and fade away.

## **Human experiences as inspirations for creating works of art**

It is pertinent to mention here that this essay does not attempt to discuss human migration in terms of material culture, but to look at it from the point of view that human experience inspires the artist to create from both his conscious and subconscious nature while existing in the twenty first century. In the words of Clock (2016);

“Humans communicate in various conscious and subconscious ways. We primarily use spoken language, but also gestures, facial expressions, and even emotions conveyed through energy like when you feel tension in a room between two people who are in a fight, or awkwardness between newly broken-up couples. Yet spoken or body language can only take us so far in our effort to truly interconnect with one another. Deep down, we understand that words don’t express our full and complete emotions. They can’t, and most of the time we run into the problem of not being able to express ourselves through words alone. That’s where art comes in. Whether it is in the form of paintings, sculptures, music, or dance, it gives us the opportunity to convey what we feel without having to speak in coherent and logical sentences. This barrier to translation, not just from one language to another, but from feelings (and even thoughts) to words is broken by art.”

She maintains that when we look at a painting or sculpture for example, we may not be able to say right away what it means to us. We may feel some connection, some like or dislike towards the piece of art, but we cannot turn to our friend and say that this painting gives us a “profound sense of belonging in the universe.” At least not right away. The important aspect though is that even when we do come up with words, they will never compare to the actual state of emotion. You cannot take your sensation, wrap it in a little package, and give it to someone else to feel and experience. Great art should be something that causes an emotion. Whether it is negative or positive, is not the issue as long as it is not outright indifference. Of course, this type of reaction is individualistic at its core. What one person weeps over, another person might walk by and disregard. Taste is as personal as the experiences we have throughout our lives. This borders on the area of aesthetics.

Kant (1791), in his “Critique of Judgment”, sets aesthetic value in opposition to both morality and to instrumental rationality. The aesthetic enjoyment of art is an end to itself, requiring no justification by reference to further purpose. Artistic production is a “play”, or in other words an occupation that is agreeable on its own account. It represents an exercise of personal autonomy, unconstrained by any external goal such as those enforced in the general run of producers by the discipline of wage labour, or on their masters by other commercial interests, though this view is distanced from the reality of artistic production. For Aristotle, art could symbolize a number of competing interests in the new social order. Art could play a role as varied as the ideal representation of the state (Mattick, 2003). Since the time man began analyzing his experiences, he has tried to define and explain the interior processes of his mind, and all those experiences which are visible to another person because they do not have physical referent (Samuels and Samuels, 1975). The artist is believed to be one who projects that truth which springs from the inner sentiment, and the draughtsman who wants to impart truth to his academy. Studies cannot preserve even a shadow of it unless he himself is able to replace that which the unmoved and indifferent soul of his model does not feel or is unable to express by actions appropriate to a given sentiment or passion. Thinking, they say consists of intellectual operations performed on cognitive material. This material becomes non-perceptual from the moment in which thinking has transformed the raw percepts into concepts. It is believed that perception and thinking, although studied separately are interrelated: our thoughts influence what we see, and vice versa. Perception consists in fitting the stimulus material with templates of relatively simple shape, which are called visual concepts or visual categories (Arnheim, 2004).

Samuels et al. (1975), believe that when a person’s eye is open, one draws to senses, things perceived outside the body. One sees the content of the room he or she is in, and other people’s sensibilities change as one shifts one’s eyes. Most people take for granted the fact that the objects they perceive are real and separate from them. When people’s eyes are closed and there is silence, images and thoughts come to them that appear to be within their mind. In their minds’ eye, people see memories of past events,



imagine future situations, daydream of what may be or might have been, and dream of vividly textured happenings beyond the bounds of space and time. Many people credit little importance to these inner events, even to the point of denying that the experiences are real. In their view, reality, that is external reality is the ground upon which people must work out their existence, whereas inner reality is at best pleasantly irrelevant and at worst, may actually endanger their existence. In our modern society, stimulation from the outer world has become so intense that people are daily and hourly bombarded so continuously that they have to make a conscious effort to shut out the outer world in order to become aware of inner experiences. Armed with such skills, the artist goes ahead to create his or her concepts, which can emanate from the existing contemporary era. According to Filani (2013), “contemporary artists now engage and experiment with new media” while Onipede (2011), believes that the primary function of the artist lies in the service to humanity. Its aesthetics or commercial value cannot really be said to be of equal importance with this primary function”. What this means is that the artist owes society a duty. Through art, society is defined, redefined and redirected. It is in this sense that artists are sometimes seen as the conscience of the society.

Onifade (2017) states that some of these artists are fine contemporary Nigerians who have defined philosophies by producing works that uninterruptedly correct errors of misinterpretation attached to some aspects of Nigerian art, and enriched with deep meanings. For example, the works of Chinenye Emelogu, Ato Arinze, and Cosmas Mbowuiké under review here, are inspired by human migrations from place to place, in search of greener pastures and a better living.

## Analyses of the works



Fig.1: Chinenye Emelogu. *Now We Are Here*, 2011. (Fired clay) Size: variable.

The artist points out other factors that people seem to ignore. These factors are so subtle that if you don't look carefully, you will not see them. It is very difficult to fight especially when one blankets the average African youth. Till date one has no other choice than to flee the continent entirely. She contemplates the lives of African migrants after she came across stories of the ordeal that they face in foreign lands that they travel to. It dawned on the artist that even though we have organizations like the Nigeria Immigrations Service that are charged with preventing human trafficking and illegal migration, the core reasons why people keep using all means possible to 'escape' the country and travel to foreign lands have not been addressed. It seems people are either afraid or simply too indifferent to address the issues, (Emelogu personal encounter, 2017).

The work, *Now We Are Here*, was born out of the need to speak out for these thousands of Nigerians and Africans for whom home has become so distressing that they decide to risk life to escape it. Media coverage of the immigration crisis became prominent with the onset of the Syrian wars. Even till now, many in the media do not see African migrants as having a genuine reason to leave home. They call them economic refugees and classify them almost as a nuisance to their new environments. To bring the plight of the African migrant to the fore, humanoid figurines were represented with helically twisted bodies topped with bulbous heads. The bodies of the figurines have characteristic stripes on them and the figurines

were made to be of different heights, sizes and shapes, representing different human age grades. The bodies of the figurines were created by wrapping wet clay in a cloth and twisting it. Additional modifications were subsequently made by freehand. The heads were produced also by a similar process. About twenty of such bisque fired figurines were arranged in a unique fashion, with all looking outward.

The figurines represent the migrants in their journey to a foreign land. Just like the figurines, the people that flock out of Africa each year are of different ages. Some are even children and pregnant women. Also, like the figurines, these migrants encounter harrowing experiences that twist them, both character wise and physically. One told the tale of watching his friend die of thirst after fellow travelers stole their gallon of water. Such experiences are able to bend even the best of men.

The heads of the figurines were intentionally made to be big and bulbous. The aim is to give the impression that the migrants are carrying heavy loads as they journey. Even more pronounced is the fact that the figurines were made without eyes or mouths. Instead, the heads are made to be twisted just like the body. This is to show that the eyes, a symbolic representation of dreams, visions and hope, have been squeezed out by the pressures that they faced at home. They also have no mouths and this is to show that even in their problems they have no way of speaking out to be heard.



Fig2 (a) *Immigrants*



Fig 2 (b) *Immigrants*, closer view

Immigrants Fig.2 by Arinze represents a sailing ship loaded with lots of people, who seem to be travelling to an unknown destination. Thousands of people fleeing civil war in Syria and religious and sectarian conflicts across the Middle East have risked their lives by crowding onto ships and boats leaving various ports for Europe.

An incident described by the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (2016), underscored some of the ordeals experienced by the African migrants. It was reported that the boat of a group of people who were fleeing to Europe capsized. Some of the people in the water seemed to sense the imminent danger and began to swim away, while others still on board climbed to the starboard side, which was the highest point, in a desperate attempt to postpone the inevitable. The ship eventually sank, and the drowning migrants were washed off by the sea onto the coast of Libya. About 562 migrants were rescued, but five people died, according to the navy. The number of the dead was given as seven. Rescuers used dinghies, a helicopter and a second navy ship. Seas were calm as the boat capsized. Water surface temperatures were around 20 degrees Celsius (a chilly 68 degrees Fahrenheit).

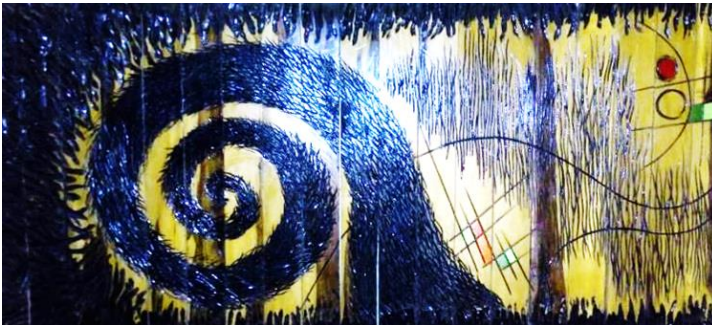


Fig 3: Cosmas Mbawuiké. *Crossing Over*. (Wood and acrylic)

Size: 130cm x 160cm. 2015

*Crossing Over* by Mbawuiké is a wooden panel sculpture, created by a systematic arrangement of 19 pieces of wood in a vertical line. Each unit of the wood is detachable (not nailed together). The carving, drawing and burning of the wood gave the patches of dark colour. The multiple colours of brown show that it was achieved with wood that has different colours

(masonia wood), while the marks or lines were created with tools like gorging and filing machines. The semicircular movement was created at the center of the work with numerous adjacent but tiny vertical lines. There is also a line that moves across both the circular movement and the numerous tiny vertical lines.

*Crossing Over*, can be linked to the biblical story, when the Israelites left the land of Egypt due to severe hardship and suffering. It also represents the 2015 experiences of war and flooding of the Arab countries such as Syria, Libya among others, which brought untold hardship on them and rendered many homeless. This brought about massive migration of the people of these countries to European countries in the search for shelter and good life. Such crises and the migrations that ensued are what inspired the work.

The semicircle movement represents the life of positive change in the family, in relation to the belief that a supreme God exists, who oversees the trend of all human activity.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, art can be a language shared among individuals, nations, and cultures. It can re-declare identities that have been lost or abandoned when people find new homes. It gives migrants a voice and it can serve as a means of being heard in an unsympathetic world. Art has the power to change public issues, and equally has the power to change man's perception of his environment. Art in the contemporary time is quick to engage with trending discourses such as migration.

These three artists have shown true dexterity in understanding and interpreting human migration, as it affects the common man positively and negatively in the twenty first century in its various contexts and contents. They have been able to interpret the underlying truth and falsehood of the so-called promises by various governments, and how these promises are breached, thereby inflicting unnecessary hardship on the people. It is hoped that the works are consumed by the right audience and that their messages are understood, and in turn yield positive fruits that will benefit all. If comfort is truly experienced and enjoyed by everyone there may not be need for one to migrate to look for greener pastures.

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