

MIGRATION OF CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN ARTISTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY: MATTERS ARISING

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Abstract

About two (2) decades to the twilight of the 20th century, Nigeria contemporary/modern art started experiencing a massive 'brain drain' of its stakeholders and practitioners. At least in some scholars' parlance the migration of Nigerian artists to 'Euroamerican' nations did not in any way improve the condition of modern/contemporary African or Nigerian art whose meaning and essence has been determined by western standard. Rather it added to the global dislocation and the loss of identity currently bedeviling Africa/Nigeria modern and contemporary art. The 21st century did not change anything as the migration continued and increased in tempo. Also, one in every five (5) art graduates in Nigeria wants to leave for the west. Today we hear of 'Canada-based Nigerian Artist; US-based Nigerian Art Historian; or 'British-based Nigerian curator/Art critic.' A comprehensive review of related literature will be conducted on the historical/recent issues on migration accompanied by an In-depth Interviews (IDIs) with some art stakeholders in the country on their opinion on this trend/development. The study will be fine-tuned with a theoretical framework in migration studies and the Push and Pull Theory will suffice.

Keywords: Migration, Contemporary/Modern Art, West, Artists

1. Introduction

Why are Nigerian artists migrating to the West? Is it for professional enhancement or to escape economic strangulations? Is it for the advancement of the goals of the internationalists, the disciples of globalization? Is it to bring home whatever African/Nigerian contemporary art is missing from the global creative forum? More questions – is it to challenge the West on their 'We' and 'Others' artistic formula? Is it to continue the fight against "Cultural Imperialism or Neo-Colonialization"? More so, is it to place at par Nigerian contemporary art with its counterpart in the West where the global standard is being dictated?

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Initially, the migration of Nigerian artists to the West started in trickles, it started with Uzo Egonu who was probably the first Nigerian artist to migrate to the West in 1945 (Babalola, 2004). But by the 21st century, we have myriad of creative artists moving to Europe and North America. This paper will address the reasons for increase migration of contemporary African/Nigerian artists to the West. Moreover, we noticed that some scholars in visual culture in Nigeria see this migration as a 'trend' in the art industry. They believe that migration to the West can assist in projecting contemporary Nigerian art and artists in the global art scene, thus paving way for their acceptability or "factor of creative necessity."

Others believe the migration is for mere economic reasons. These two areas of thoughts precipitated the theory of Push and Pull and Cultural hybridization. The push and pull theory addresses the economic reasons while cultural hybridization discuss the cultural relevance of the migration 'trend.'

2. Literature Review/Conceptual Framework

Adewale (2005) in Amrevurayire and Ojeh (2016) defined migration as the movement of people from one geographical region to another; it could be on temporary or permanent basis. People migrate based on the prevailing situations and the reasons for migrating vary depending on the reasons for such decision. Migration is a selective process affecting individuals or families with certain economic, social, educational and demographic characteristics (Amrevurayire and Ojeh, 2016). There are movements from rural to urban areas; from poor to rich countries; from political/economic instability to economically viable ones. But the migration based on cultural or in search of creative/artistic satisfaction is rare.

Migration occurs as a reaction to economic development as well as social, cultural, environmental and political factors and effects on areas of origin and destination (Adewale, 2005 in Amrevurayire and Ojeh, 2016). Adewale further gave reasons why people move, they include, escaping violence, political instability, drought, congestion in various dimensions and suspected or real persecution. Also, adverse physical conditions such as flood, landslide (erosion and earthquake), insects and pests, soil infertility, contribute largely to the reasons why people leave our environment for another. But Adewale (2005) did not identify any reason or reasons creative people or artists migrate from their homeland to other nations.

According to Xu, et al(2018), migration is the geographical movement of individuals across a specified boundary for the purpose of establishing a new

residence. They also agreed that migrant populations, both within countries and internationally, have been on the increase in the past few decades. Citing the World Migration Report of 2015 from International Organization for Migration, Xu, et al (2018) revealed that recent estimates in 2013 indicate that there were more than 232 million international migrants; and 740 million internal migrants worldwide. This dramatic increase in the migrant populations has drawn particular attention to migration and the resurgence of neo-slavery in the 21st century.

Just like Adewale (2005), Xu, et al tried to identify what they called "migration status." They posit that an individual's migration status includes several inter-correlated key elements, such as geographic patterns, age at migration/length of stay, and reasons for migration. Xu, et al also observed that a major trend in migration in the world today is that people tend to move from less developed areas (e.g. rural settings, low-and-middle-income countries) to more developed places (e.g. Urban areas, high-income countries). These migrations are for more job opportunities, better education or higher wages (World Migration Report, 2005 in Xu, et al, 2018). In addition to these types of migration that are often described as upward social mobility, other types of geographic movements also exist. Such include involuntary migration due to natural disasters or migration for the purpose of marriage or family union (Xu et al, 2018).

A critical component of migration worthy of mention is the "Age of Migration" or length of stay. It is another major component of an individual's migration status (Xu et al, 2018). Xu et al also observed that first; age of migration is likely to be linked with the length of exposure to certain physical and social environments. Also, people tend to migrate for specific reasons at various stages of their life course. For instance up-ward social mobility is more likely to occur during young-adulthood (Xu et al, 2018).

Having defined migration and its rudimentary components, what is contemporary Nigerian art and who is a contemporary Nigerian Artist? Contemporary Nigerian Artist has several interchangeable names such as post-independence Nigerian art, post-colonial Nigerian art, and modern Nigerian art (Famule, 2014). But it could be referred as a creative continuum of the aesthetics, meaning, concept and social interrogation of human existence, which is an addition to its predecessor (traditional art) qualities that include abstract/interpretation and functionality with servitude to religion (Nnadozie, 2018). It is a "western-type of art" which requires that its maker or creator acquires the required artistic skills through formal (academic) and/or informal

(workshop-oriented) art training system(s) (Famule, 2014). Any artist who passed through academic artistic training as well as informal training such as western-oriented workshop could be referred as a contemporary Nigerian Artist. In Nigeria, Aina Onabolu (1862-1963) was the pioneer contemporary Artist.

At the turn of the millennium, Nigeria contemporary art began to witness radical changes in techniques, media and process/art making generally within the framework of conceptual art. All that matters became concept and meaning with new form/media emerging, such new media are electronic, performance and installation arts. One factor that aided the emergence of the new trend is of course globalization (Nnadozie, 2018).

Suffice to state that most of the exponents of this 21st century art trend referred to as neo-contemporary Nigerian art were Nigerian migrants' artists living and working mostly in the West. According to Nnadozie (2018) some of them are master "recycling/repurposing artist of international repute such as Junkman, Bright Eke, Sokari Camp Douglas, Moyo Okededeji, Yinka Shonibare and Nnenna Okorie." Their object/materials of creativity are unconventional; they include disused and discarded materials, found objects, junks and other forms of waste or disused objects, electronic appliances, film/video making and theatrical performance. Artists of neo-contemporary Nigerian art have "understanding and critical appropriation of disused objects" and the above-mentioned techniques (Filani, 2013). But we hear of artists migrations to other nations especially the 'euroamerican' nations as political asylum seekers. Most contemporary artists in third world countries through their art berate their governments for bad governance and thus incur the wrath of these governments.

Some migrate to the West to continue their career in different environment with the hope of making some difference in the style or technique of creativity but end up been consumed by the artistic processes in their host country. Others simply migrate because of economic strangulation in Nigeria and their inability to survive through their art. Others migrate and could not stand the challenges of practicing in the West and take to other jobs or means of survival especially when their travelling documents are not legally obtained. They thus become part of the 21st century neo-slavery (Obi-Ani, Obi-Ani & Isiani, 2020). These are the major reasons for artists' migration to the West.

3. Theoretical Perspective

Push and Pull Theory

According to Torum (2002) in Amrevurayire and Ojeh (2016), the interplay of both "Push and Pull" factors at the points of origin and destination stimulates migrations. Push factors that course migration include as earlier mentioned political crisis/instability, famine, unemployment, wars, unstable economy and hardship among others. The Pull factors are the desire for better life or good standard of living, job opportunities, desire for qualitative education, better housing, good medical care/facilities and good road network. From all indications these pull and push factors equally apply to reasons there are massive migration of contemporary Nigerian artists to the West. Most of them travel not for economic reasons, but in search of professional/creative fulfillment. Others in the quest to contribute to the global artistic development through Nigeria art, while some claim they are running from political persecution from government and its institutions as a reaction to their using of their art to solicit for good governance and social justice. How can we prove this? Several individuals in the visual arts sub-sector across the nation were granted interviews and their summation attest to this conclusion.

4. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative study involving in-depth interviews conducted through the social media, WhatsApp to be precise. Ten (10) purposively selected stakeholders in visual art sector were selected. They include studio artists; curators; art administrators; art writers/journalists; Art historians (Lecturers); Secondary schools Art teachers and art activists. They were selected from different parts of the country where they are living and working, Enugu, Lagos, Uyo and Abuja.

The participants were privately interviewed through their WhatsApp platform and the interview questions were open ended. The responses were transferred from WhatsApp text analyzed and contextualized. Though 10 (ten) participants were sent questions only 4 (Four) responded as at the time of writing this paper, but their response contributed meaningfully to the discussion. None of the respondent is living in the Diaspora; this is a minus for the research because their input could have added to the intended results. The inability to interview artists in the Diaspora is due to time and difficulty in contacting them, apart from this observation, the research interview was successful.

5. Findings

There are 4 (Four) major questions that set the discussion, which was engaged by four (4) respondents, comprising of art administrator, curator, an art activist and an art teacher.

Do you think that artists' migration to the West is on the increase?

All the respondents agreed with this. Specifically Izu Muoneme who is the current Chairman Society of Nigerian Artist Enugu State Chapter responded:

Absolutely. African Artists are migrating to the West in their large numbers. This trend has been going on over the years and has become more rampant in recent times.

Olufemi Ogunseye a school art teacher residing in Abuja while agreeing with Muoneme's assertions added:

...infact, it's not only to the West but to any part of the world where they could put their discipline to use and also display their talents or do any other job just to make a living.

We noticed that Ogunseye believe the artists' migration do not end up in their continuous practicing of their profession but there is the possibility of doing "any other job just to make a living." This is where the artist becomes a victim of the trending neo-slavery of the 21st century.

What could be the reasons?

All the respondents believe that migration is due to economic reasons. Some further related their experience in trying to produce and sell their artworks in Nigeria. Muoneme said:

The reasons are not farfetched and are very obvious. The current economic and political climate in Nigeria has contributed tremendously to this unfortunate or fortune trend. Low patronage and lack of credible platforms to promote contemporary visual arts is among the major factors that encourage massive Westward migration of contemporary Nigerian Artists.

Ogunseye took a wider view and approach to the above question. Below are the details:

The reasons for the increase in the migration of artists to not only the West, but to any greener pasture are hydra-headed.

i. Art appreciation/Aesthetics

Very few people appreciate and are willing to acquire Art piece(s) this is because of the value we, in Africa placed on aesthetics. We see this as tertiary in our order of needs.

ii. Lack of employment

Over the years, the government has failed to provide job for the people. Year in year out, our territory institutions keep turning out graduates in different fields with no place to work. This frustrating situation makes artist to travel out of the country.

iii. State of the economy

The economy of the nation has paralyzed. The so-called middle class has been reduced to the poor class, leaving us with few rich people. This is why in Nigeria, artworks flourish in very few places like Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt, Benin, Asaba, Warri and other big cities where you have the rich. This is so because, the poor must take care of their basic needs first. Feeding, clothing, accommodation, medicals etc. before he could think of buying an art piece to be hung on the wall of a rented room.

iv. Enabling environment

The country is not conducive for artists or for a large number of artists to succeed. This is so because, if we look at the number of graduates from our school in comparison with those that have dumped art practice for other fields, this could be about 25% to 85% if not less. Artists hardly connect etc. some will reduce their price to give away just to put food on their tables.

v. Frustration

I know of 5 powerful contemporary Nigerian artists that are in the US now. This is because they got frustrated of selling their works cheap, no incentive or encouragement from anywhere. They quickly pulled their resources together and jetted out of the country.

In response to question 2, Ezekwezi Mgbeneme a Deputy Director in the National Gallery of Art, and Zonal Coordinator South-South Zonal Directorate of the apex art agency in Uyo, says: "The major reason for the migration is due to the poor appreciation of art in Nigeria owing to "poverty mentality" amongst many." He further relates two (2) personal experiences to substantiate his position:

First. I had a bitter experience in Lagos in the 90s; a man blatantly told me that he would not buy my artwork because the artwork will not feed him, so he did not have to waste his money on irrelevant things.

Second. A friend asked me to point a prominent Nigerian. When I told him what it could cost him, he screamed and said, "is it not just to paint, I will buy you a plate of food." Of course, I told him to forget about it. Our people still see art as a wasted venture.

From the above various response and related experience, we can see that most Nigerian contemporary artists are running from economic strangulation and unconducive environment to practice their trade.

But some say that migration is a way of projecting Nigerian contemporary art into the global art scene, is this true?

In response to the above question, Ekpo Udo-Udoma an art administrator and a curator who once lived and worked as curator in New York, United States said:

... I however do not think it is just to project Nigerian contemporary art. I think it's much more of an economic issue. For most it is that the grass is always greener on the other side. The truth is that only about 10% of Nigerian artists that go abroad and succeed as artists. This is because the system in most of these countries is very much different from Nigeria, in the sense that being a full-time artist in most of these countries is difficult. It is only those who have jobs that provide the flexibility that allows one to practice in his or her free time.

However, Izu Muoneme agrees that migration:

...has contributed immensely in exposing African artists and their arts to the global art scene and has also contributed to scholarly and economic activities in both Africa and the world at large.

Ogunseye also agrees with Muoneme's view with little deviation. He said:

Projecting Nigerian contemporary art into the global art scene. Yes. This is correct in a way. To those that still practice Art abroad, to those that could create new concept, style or exceptionally gifted.

But he further avers:

To those that have support, those without documentation problem. They are the ones that can exhibit and sell their works. What is the

percentage of contemporary Nigerian Artists abroad that are still practicing? I know of a popular cartoonist with a popular newspaper that travelled to United Kingdom as early as 1983. Nobody heard about his art again. The issue of projecting Nigerian contemporary art into the global scene has a lot of variables attached to it. However, the percentage of those that are still practicing is very low compared to those that have left the shore of Nigeria.

But Ezekwezili Mgbemene disagreed completely with the views of other respondents. Here is his point of view:

NO! We will project our contemporary art globally by drawing the world's attention to us, e.g. FESTAC'77 etc, rather than migrating to and developing another man's home front.

Mgbemene's summation is self-explanatory, instead of migrating to the West; why not draw the West to Africa (Nigeria), through mega art festivals? Such art festivals include international Art biennials, international ArtExpos and conferences/creative workshops. The 1977 Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture –FESTAC 77 is a typical example.

Finally, what effect(s) does this development/trend have on contemporary art practice and teaching in Nigeria?

None of the respondents agree that migration can contribute positively to contemporary art practice and teaching in Nigeria. Rather they are suggesting the cessation of this migration because of its "brain drain" effect on art pedagogy in Nigeria. According to Muoneme:

Unfortunately, this trend has reduced the growth and sustainability of scholarly activities among contemporary artists and art practices in Nigeria. It has also made contemporary art practice and teaching in Nigeria unattractive and has reduced the number of credible artists and art teachers who will propagate Nigerian contemporary art beyond the present generation.

Udo-Udoma posits that:

For some artists, there is something called contemporary Nigerian art, for others it is for them to prove it. I am however a strong believer and my view is that African art exists. It then means that there is an art that is distinctly Nigerian. I however do not see how a Nigerian art would be

enhanced by Nigerian art can be promoted within Nigerian as well as outside especially in this age of online transactions.

Mgbemene believes that:

Out of sight is out of mind. Even the bible tells us, "Where your treasure is, that is where your mind will be," meaning that wherever an artist is located, there is the tendency that his creativity will reflect the environment. Migrating to another place is an indication that we do not value our environment, which eventually affects the artist's creative mind.

According to Ogunseye, the effects of the migration of artists to the West have both short- and long-term effects. The short-term effects are that there will be or there is a massive brain drain of our great artists out of the country. Very few still practice art once they are out of the country. Ogunseye avers that the nation loses the recognition, fame and artworks that these artists were supposed to have produced if they have stayed back. More so, the tourism sector will be greatly affected. Artists could be self-reliant and also be employers of labor in the areas of textile products, ceramics, fashion design, metal design, industrial design etc. All these have been truncated by migration of artists (Ogunseye, 2021).

6. Discussion

Talking about the long-term effects of migration on development of modern Nigerian art, Ogunseye (2021) believes that the art sector will continue to shrink. Without enough artists to continue to encourage art appreciation and patronage within the country, art will continue to suffer socio-economic rejection that the field is struggling with in Nigeria presently.

At this point we tried to identify some prominent Nigerian artists who have travelled abroad and lived or are living and working there and how this has affected their work. Some of these artists according to Olu Oguibe in Okoro (2015) break through "the displacing barricades of metropolitan exclusionism and became able to claim their place and come to the mainstream of art in the West, and also their contributions towards developments of contemporary African Art." How true is this?

Previous responses to interviews indicated that migrating abroad is a not a yardstick in projecting modern Nigeria art into the global art scene. Thus,

Oguibe's assertion is not completely true. Though there are few who are doing their best in that direction such include, late Uzo Egonu, Chris Ofili, Olu Oguibe, Sokari Douglas Camp and Yinka Shonibare to mention but few. We will discuss few of them.

Uzo Egonu probably was the first Nigerian artist to migrate to the West but in different circumstance. According to Babalola (2004) he went to Europe to study at the age of 13 in 1945, shortly after the end of Second World War. He has exhibited extensively in Europe, the United States and Africa. Initially, his works appeared in western connotation but was later influenced by the 1966-70 pogrom and Nigerian civil war that resulted to his popular painting titled "Exodus." Since then he continued to search for meaning for his works through his Igbo heritage (Babalola, 2004).

Emmanuel Okechukwu Odita is the first of the Zaria revolutionaries (formerly referred as Zaria Rebels) to migrate abroad. After his training at Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST) now Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in 1962, he joined the staff of Nsukka School of Art briefly before travelling to the United States for further studies. He has since being teaching and practicing in Ohio State University, Columbus where he is said to have established one of the few curriculum available on contemporary African Art in the United State (Babalola, 2004).

Sokari Douglas Camp is another renowned pioneer artist in the Diaspora. Born in 1958 in Buguma in River State, she had most of her academic training abroad such as the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland in 1978, Central School of Art and Design, London in 1983 and the Royal College of Art, London in 1986. According to Babalola (2004) she had received several prizes, awards and scholarships, which enabled her train in excellent art schools and helped her "start her career as a confident and vivacious female sculptor." She works in steel and her sculptures are in semi-abstract figurative forms. Her work reflects her personal experiences and the culture of her Kalabari nation, such as the sound and movement of Kalabari masquerades, funerals, plays, regattas and festivals. This simply indicates that despite living in the West, Camp is not detached from her heritage just as Egonu also did. One of her popular sculptures is "Church Ede."

There are other artists who were once champions of 'ethno-aestheticism' while living and working in Nigeria before migrating to abroad. We noticed that these ones have gradually shifted from their initial styles in their quest not to be displaced by the "barricades of metropolitan exclusionism" in the West. Olu Oguibe and Chika Okeke-Agulu quickly call to mind.

Initially, while in Nigeria Oguibe was regarded as one of the most remarkable artists of his time. He is often called “an angry young artist,” a term that no longer seems to apply to him. His poetry and artwork produced from diverse media often reflect political and social issues as well as changes in his own life (Nnadozie, 2014). In Nigeria, he painted on traditional mats, baskets and cane meshes, but when he left for United Kingdom both for study and ‘political asylum,’ he painted in watercolor and later acrylics (Fullerton 1997 in Nnadozie, 2014). Nnadozie made further revelations:

As he moves into the post-modern world of Art, the interest of this Professor of African Art at the University of South Florida shifted to installation art, through which he evokes the suffering of children and his own childhood experiences during the Biafra war. In time, he has gradually ceased to draw upon Uli and Nsibidi designs, but he does explore the arts of other third world countries. He has now completely moved beyond the Nsukka tradition. Critically one tends to get a bit worried by this development...

Another artist of the same equation is Chika Okeke-Agulu whom when working in Nigeria used a lot of Uli and Nsibidi designs to engage his productions. His themes and contents reflect the same ethno-aesthetic ideas and socio-political issues like Oguibe’s, but he also seems to have either handled the same issues with less enthusiasm in his later years. His recent works reflect post-modernist tendencies probably discarding Uli and Nsibidi along the way (Akinosho 1996 in Nnadozie, 2014).

In the area of art scholarship, Jegede (2020) informed us that “the westward migration of Nigerian [visual arts] scholars” started in trickle in the early 1990s with the exits of Rowland Abiodun, Babatunde Lawal including himself (Jegede) all Professors of African Art History. By the 21st century it has “became a deluge as prominent Nigerian art students and scholars felt sufficiently incentivized to leave the country” (Jegede, 2020). He further observed that:

Today, many Nigerian [art] scholars appear eager to go into voluntary exile in exchange for the opportunity to simply experience the challenge of creating without pandering, and teaching without palpitating. Nigeria should of course regard it as a major compliment that perhaps many of her best scholars are in United States. On the other hand, this might be no more than a gratuitous superciliousness.

From the above observation, one can see that Artists and their scholars migrate to the West for economic conveniences and enabling environment, while creating a 'brain-drain' "plague" for the nation.

7. Conclusion

This study authenticates the fact that there is a massive migration of contemporary Nigerian artists and their scholars (theorists, writers, critics and lecturers) to western nations because of economic pressure and a conducive environment to practice and teach. This study also noticed that not all the artists that migrate eventually make it as some of them cannot live up to their dreams and therefore turn to other kinds of job to survive. This condition normally results to neo-slavery. Also, the quest to project modern Nigerian art to the global art scale is not most time successful because of the standard put in place by the West on how to evaluate other cultures' art, thus making a caricature of their globalization policy. The paper finally observed that migration does not in any way enhance the "internationalization tendencies" sought after by the average modern African/Nigerian artists; rather, it assists in dislocating him/her artistically and creatively. Issues of some Nigerian artists living and practicing in the West and struggling to retain the cultural/ethno-aesthetic content in their artwork is a point in case. Moreover, all the interviewees in this study said NO TO MIGRATION because of its "brain-drain" effect on the nation. It is a hindrance to enhancing Nigeria's creative spirit and promoting the appreciation of Nigeria's Art.

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Interviewees

- Mgbemene, Ezekwesili, Deputy Director and Zonal Coordinator South-South Zonal Directorate, National Gallery of Art, Uyo.
- Muoneme, Izuu, Chairman Society of Nigeria Artists (SNA) Enugu State Chapter
- Ogunseye, Olufemi, an Art Activist in the FCT and an Art Teacher. He lives and works in Abuja
- Udo-Udoma, Ekpo. A trained Art Administrator and Curator. He was for years the Administrator of Harmattan Workshop, Agbarha Otor, and Bruce Onabrakpeya Foundation. He lives and works in Lagos.