

Home and sense of belonging among Iraqi Kurds in the UK

By [Ali Zalme](#).

All too often we are forced into assumptions and caricatures of a particular group that fail to expose nuanced experiences of the members of that group. My new book, [*Home and Sense of Belonging among Iraqi Kurds in the UK*](#) (Lexington Books, 2020), is an effort to voice out lived experiences of an uncharted immigrant community – that of Iraqi Kurds in the UK. It looks at their different generational experiences in the context of transnational family life, with particular regard to their sense of home and belonging.

The book is also about my own journey searching for identity. As a Kurd I never belonged to Iraq where we were persecuted, discriminated against and subject to genocide. And as a Hawrami speaker I have not always been relaxed about my Kurdishness and have often felt like an outsider – a minority within a minority. This book is an attempt to understand a complex diaspora in which many people find it difficult to belong. Among the voices of individuals from Iraqi Kurdish communities here in the UK my voice is also present.

As an interpreter and community organiser working closely with Kurdish families and individuals in Bristol and other major cities, I have long considered questions about home and belonging. One project I was involved in was establishing a Kurdish supplementary school or so-called Sunday school to help Kurdish children learn their mother tongue. That particular experience and my contacts with Kurdish families led to my master's dissertation on cultural identities among diasporic communities. In particular, I was interested in ideas about the physical home in the UK and the imagined ancestral home among the Kurdish second-generation in Bristol ([Zalme 2011](#)). I continued to work and extend my research with the Kurdish community during my PhD, on which this book is based.

As a first-generation Kurd in Britain I am interested in the differences and similarities between parents and children, and between me (as a male researcher) and my female participants, in our understandings of home and belonging. In addition to my gender and generational identity, my linguistic background as a Hawrami speaker was highly relevant to my fieldwork. Being Hawrami and having grown up in an environment in Iraqi Kurdistan where Kurdish-Sorani speakers were dominant (and this is still the case in the diaspora) has often made me question who I am and where I belong.

In the diaspora I have tended to involve myself in many activities to support the Hawrami, which was not always possible in Kurdistan. There the hegemonic nationalist ideology situated all Kurds as a unified people regardless of the 'trivial' narratives relating to ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities. In Britain, this disjuncture between my lived experience of being born and raised a Hawrami and the culture of others in the UK Kurdish community has remained acute. In examining my own sense of home and belonging and that of my participants, this book pays close attention to the diversity of the Kurdish diaspora and introduces the notion of a diaspora within a diaspora. By concentrating on Iraqi Kurds, it shows how identities formed back home in Iraqi Kurdistan have had a significant impact on the community in the UK.

This book challenges the prevalent essentialist and nationalist approach to research of diasporic communities. Instead of providing generalisations about whether the younger generation will follow their parents or take a different route, my findings suggest a more complex picture about the degree of parental power and political interest. The life stories of different members of Kurdish immigrant families show that they are each negotiating the making of new homes on a daily basis. A great number of my participants have suggested that most members of diasporic communities are family orientated and tend to establish a new home in the UK while erasing the other due to these family commitments.

My research has also shown that Kurdish women have more opportunity to be independent in exile than those living in Kurdistan, and yet they maintain their ethnic identity and have strong affiliations with the Kurdish question (that is, the nationalist project of the nation-building process). New challenges and new opportunities face Kurdish women here as they find themselves living between two contrasting cultures. As a result, their concept of 'home' is highly complex: many vividly express their frustration regarding the patriarchal culture at home in Iraq, but at the same time they struggle to integrate into a British society that gives them greater independence. Instead, they live in an imaginary home that is neither quite here nor there but somewhere in-between. My book concludes that we need to be more focused on the particularity of Kurdish cases and avoid homogenisation with respect to Kurdish diaspora studies in the United Kingdom.

Ali Zalme obtained his PhD in Sociology at the University of the West of England. He is a freelance researcher interested in migration identity and belongings with a particular focus on the Middle East and the Kurdish diaspora.

