

---

# Identity and Belonging in the Transnational World

27-04-2023

## Authors

Sara A. Karim

**Summary :** The present article addresses the experience of identity and belonging among second-generation Kurdish youths who returned to their ancestral homeland after an upbringing in Western Europe. The youths' descriptions of self are taken to imply an understanding of themselves as transnational actors; they identified with both their ancestral homeland and the country where they grew up, felt a sense of belonging to both places and engaged in practices across the borders.

All aspects of migrants' lives are no longer necessarily related to the country where they settle down. In the 21st century, the significance of both physical and man-made borders have diminished for certain groups of migrants as an increasing number of people belong to more than one community. By virtue of their everyday practices, these migrants are involved in relations and networks that span two or more national states. In many cases, they have a desire to settle down in the receiving country while feeling a need to preserve the strong ties to the country of origin. In recent years, the academic field of transnationalism has emerged in response to this development **1**. Interaction has always occurred across national borders, but as a result of modern technology and communication, migrants are now able to participate in the day-to-day life of their family in the country of origin in a completely different way than before **2**. It has also become easier for children of migrants to develop transnational ties to their ancestral homes **3**.

In 1990, a semi-independent Kurdish region was set up in South-Kurdistan<sup>4</sup> following Saddam Hussein's defeat in the first Gulf War. Aside from its fundamental political and economic implications, the establishment of this new entity led to increased contact between Kurds living abroad and their homeland. This consequently caused a proliferation of transnational ties among Kurdish migrants, especially those from the Iraqi part **5**, but also among Kurds from the Turkish, Iranian and Syrian parts of Kurdistan **6**. As a result of the still precarious political and economic situation in the area, however, transnational contact between Kurdish migrants and Kurdistan in the 1990s mainly consisted in telephone contact and the occasional visit **7**. The removal of Saddam Hussein from power in 2003 brought greater stability, strong economic growth and an expansion of transnational ties which lasted until the fall in oil prices and the emergence of the Islamic State. The period between 2004 and 2014 was thus characterized by investments in both human and financial capital in South-Kurdistan from Kurds living abroad. In this period of prosperity, involvement in transnational practices was not limited to first-generation Kurdish migrants living overseas. Some of their children also engaged in the form of transnational activity: That is the main subject of this article. After having spent their whole lives in Western Europe, they sought to return to their ancestral homeland. The theoretical starting point of this article is the concept "transnational social fields", which refers to networks of relationships that connect agents across borders and through which they organize actions and exchange ideas **8**. Characteristic for agents in transnational social fields is the fact that they are exposed to social expectations, cultural values and patterns of action from more than one social, economic and political system **9**. The focus of this article is how Kurdish youths draw on their transnational backgrounds in their negotiation of identity and belonging. This leads to the following research question: How is identity and belonging formed and negotiated within transnational social fields among the second generation **10** with a Kurdish background?



No: 505566.08 Date: 29.01.2005 Credit: HALEY/SIPA

Headline: Irak elections : Irak ex-pats vote in France.

Caption: Iraqi Kurds from the region of Clermont-Ferrand have come as a group to vote. They consider that this is a first step toward an eventual independence of Kurdistan.

**Sipa Press**

For the first time in their lives, these Iraqi exiles vote for an Iraqi parliament. The only polling station in France, where there are 1041 Iraqis registered to vote, will be open for three days. Iraqis from Spain, Italy, and Switzerland will have to come here to vote also. Out of Country voting for Iraqi Parliament is organized by the International Organization for Migration (OIM).  
Paris, FRANCE - 29/01/2005.

Iraqi Kurds from the region of Clermont-Ferrand have come as a group to vote.

## 1: Transnational social fields (ways of being and ways of being)

Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick-Schiller (2004)<sup>11</sup> developed the concept of transnational social fields based on, inter alia, Bourdieu's social field concept<sup>12</sup>. Their intention was to describe how migrants' agency is not limited to the nation state, but can span across the borders of two or three countries<sup>13</sup>. Bourdieu introduced the concept of social field in order to focus on how relations between social agents are structured by a field constituted by struggles for social dominance between the agents themselves. His perspective did not however, address the possibility that social fields may not be coextensive with the territory of the nation state<sup>14</sup>. Also, the so-called Manchester school in social anthropology played an important role in the development of the concept of transnational social fields. Its representatives emphasized the dual connection of migrants to both local tribal communities and modern industrial cities and the formation of networks between these two locations<sup>15</sup>.

The country of upbringing and the parents' homeland constitute a transnational social field consisting of economic activity, religious and social organizations and transnational media. This field is the context in which second generation youths are brought up and which shapes their knowledge, awareness, transnational connections and identity<sup>16; 17; 18</sup>. Therefore, second generation identity is not simply an extension of the identity of the majority culture or that of the parental generation. Instead, the selfhood of second-generation youths emerges as a product of their experiences of growing up within transnational social fields. On the one hand, the youths are subjected to socialization with influences from two or more cultures; on the other hand, they develop their own identity through interaction in specific contexts<sup>19</sup>.

Levitt and Glick-Schiller (2004)<sup>20</sup> furthermore, base their notion of transnational social fields on the distinction between "ways of being" – the social relations and practices in which the agents are actually involved – and "ways of belonging" – practices that signal and express a certain identity and belonging <sup>21; 22</sup>. The actions of agents do not always coincide with their identity and belonging, and it is therefore possible to distinguish between ways of being and ways of belonging in the transnational social field <sup>23</sup>. By virtue of being part of the transnational social field, second-generation youths dispose over the necessary knowledge to make use of transnational ties, even if these do not currently serve as a basis for their agency or identification. In other words, the ties can be mobilized as a resource when the context makes it required or opportune <sup>24; 25</sup>. The agency and identity of second-generation migrants can therefore only be properly understood within a contextual framework of the transnational social field as opposed to the nation state <sup>26</sup>.

In the present article the youths' identity and belonging are approached from the perspective of "ways of being" and "ways of belonging". The former concept refers, within the context of this article, to practices that the participants are involved in within transnational social fields (the parents' home country and the country of upbringing). Ways of belonging, however, entails how involvement in such transnational practices in various contexts and later in life affects the participants' choice of identity and ways of expressing belonging.

## 2: Methodology

The background for the research was an interest in investigating identity formation and belonging among youths with a Kurdish background raised in Western Europe who returned to their parents' homeland <sup>27</sup>. In order to bring out the participants' understanding of their own identity, a qualitative in-depth interview has been chosen as the research method. Semi-structured interviews based on an interview guide were conducted with 12 young adults with Kurdish parents, all of whom had been born and/or raised in Western Europe. The youths were between 19 and 33 years old. Two of the participants were found through acquaintances and five through family members. The rest of the participants were recruited through the snowball method, that is through the participants themselves. The interviews were conducted in a café, the place of work of the participant or in their home. An audio recorder was used during the interviews, which lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. In total, seven women and five men were interviewed. All the interviews were transcribed and translated from Kurdish into Norwegian. Transnationalism was used as a theoretical frame of reference for the understanding the situation of the participants. In the coding and analysis of the material, however, the descriptions and interpretations of the participants themselves served, to an extent, as the point of departure for the treatment of the material.

## 3: Analysis & Findings

The following is an analysis of how an upbringing in a transnational social field influences the experience of identity and belonging among youths with a Kurdish background.

### 3:1 Identity as a Wave

The identity of the youths manifested itself as an inner emotion that rarely, if at all, was given outward expression. A youth who self-presented as Kurdish could still harbour feelings of Westernness<sup>28</sup> inside him. This internal identity would sometimes assume the form of a surging "emotional wave". The accentuation of either of these two identities – Kurdish or Western – would vary according to circumstances and needs. The participant Lass' description of inner identity is typical for these youths:

"I often feel British inside, even if I do not usually talk about it. Especially when the UK is involved in a political issue, then I

get a strong feeling of being not only European, but primarily British. And also, when I watch sports together with friends; I do not necessarily express it, but the feeling is still there, of course."

Immediately after having emphasized his identification as British, Lass states the following:

"I generally feel Kurdish. What I just told you is something that comes over me, like a wave. At the time of the Kurdish protests against violence, I participated. I felt a hundred times more Kurdish in England than *here* **29**. But, at the same time I am also European."

As is evident from the quotation above, Lass admits that his Kurdishness had grown weaker after he settled **30** in the homeland of his parents. This was also the case for several of the other participants. The following comment from the participant Zana expresses a similar sentiment: *"When I was in the UK, to be Kurdish meant everything to me. But after I returned, everything gradually became less important."* The participants were asked to explain the reason for such feelings. To this, one of them replied: Mellan: *"Because you live far away. Here, you encounter another culture, and the culture you grew up in becomes stronger."* Later, Lass himself hinted to a possible explanation for this emotional state by quoting a Kurdish proverb:

"I don't know; in Kurdish we have a saying: *Dachita dur dabita pur* \_Absence makes the heart grow fonder. I think that distance enhances emotions [...]. Because of the great geographical distance, you attempt to develop a sense of belonging, I believe, to avoid losing the connection between yourself and your home country."

Rather than a process of identity formation, the transnational activity of moving to the homeland of their parents entailed a continuous state of identity transformation for the youths. Their identities could consequently not be categorized as either Western or Kurdish. Therefore, the identity of the second generation did not simply amount to an evolution of the self-understanding of the first generation **31**. The youths negotiated their identity in an independent manner and based on their own experiences and situational context. They engaged in transnational ways of being by participating in social relations and practices across national borders, and they exhibited transnational ways of belonging by expressing either their Kurdish or Western identity depending on the situation. The youths would, moreover, combine ways of being and ways of belonging in various and often contradictory ways. Most of the participants had, for instance, been brought up Kurdish, with an emphasis on Kurdish language and culture; however, they did not identify as Kurdish in all situations. Therefore, depending on the specific context where the youths were situated, ways of being did not necessarily coincide with ways of belonging.

### **3.2: The sense of belonging to both "here" and "there"**

In today's world one's sense of belonging and emotional ties is not, in many cases, associated with a particular place, but with many locations at once. Hence, the youths had difficulties answering questions such as: "Where is home? Where do you belong". In some cases, the youths would give an insecure smile in response to this query, and they appeared to be emotionally touched. It was evident that it was challenging for them to be faced with the choice of belonging to one of the locations. The experience of "home" is for transnational youths not tied to the place where they were born or where they grew up; rather, it is connected to transnational experiences of cultural belonging that challenge conventional borders. Thus, the return of the youths to their ancestral homeland was not motivated by stronger feelings of belonging to this country compared to the Western country of their upbringing. Instead, the youths cited opportunities to use their qualifications and the prospects of a bright future in South-Kurdistan as reasons for their choice. As if to emphasize his difficulty in expressing a preference for either of the two countries, one of the youths used only a slash to separate his country of origin from his ancestral homeland when he referred to them:

"Kurdistan/Great Britain. I cannot choose one of them. Kurdistan and Great Britain mean equally much to me. I feel a

sense of belonging to both countries. I cannot inflict any harm to either of these countries."

Lana 32 would have stayed in Norway had it not been for her parents. However, this did not prevent her from feeling a sense of equal belonging to both countries:

"Oh, that is difficult. It is *here*, but where you feel at home is, well, I don't know. It can be a bit back and forth. The homeland is *here*, and I know that, but Oslo also feels like home. I don't know. I have spent a lot of time *there*, and I have many memories, friends, and perhaps that is why it feels a little bit more like home *there* than *here*, but I also feel very much at home when I arrive Suleimani after coming from Hawler."

In their narratives both these participants express a strong sense of belonging to both Kurdistan and the country where they grew up. They do not place their country of upbringing above their ancestral homeland in importance, or vice versa. For these youths belonging was first and foremost associated with memories, time and friends. It entailed acceptance as a member of society and a feeling of security, as well as actual participation in the value systems, practices and networks that are available in a specific location. The youths' emotional attachment and profound sense of belonging to both countries were expressed in various practices that represented an observable manifestation of their affective ties. These actions showed their ability to adapt to different circumstances and broadened their outlook on the world. The way the youths expressed their identity would vary with context and was affected by their life in the ancestral homeland and by their relationship to friends and relatives in two countries. The youths' family background and degree of parent involvement played an important role in the development of their transnational identity and belonging. As a result, it was possible for them to feel belonging to two separate geographical locations. A recurring topic in the interviews was how the youths felt attachment to both their ancestral homeland and their country of upbringing.

## 4: Conclusion

All the interviewed youths had participated in activities related to their parents' homeland during their upbringing. By celebrating Kurdish national holidays, travelling to Kurdistan and sending remittances, the youths were introduced to transnational involvement from an early age. They were still integrated in their country of upbringing, however, despite – or because of – the importance of their ancestral homeland in their lives. Their identification with either country would also vary according to context and preference. Their ways of belonging did not always coincide with their ways of being as it was possible for them to feel a sense of belonging in their country of upbringing while still participating in transnational practices that connected them to their ancestral home. As a result of their transnational experiences the youths felt a dual sense of belonging; their experience of "home" was not confined to the place where they were born or raised. In this way the youths' sense of identity and belonging may challenge conventional understandings of these notions as tied to a single geographical and national space.