HOMInG Interview

with **Ajay Bailey (Utrecht University)**

Conducted by Paolo Boccagni

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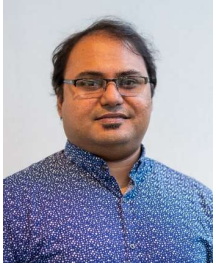

Ajay Bailey *is Professor of Social Urban Transitions at International Development Studies, Department of Human Geography and Spatial Planning, Utrecht University, The Netherlands. His research is at the interface of anthropology, geography, public health and demography with a specific focus on urban inequality in the Global South, access to public services, cultural diversity and international skilled migration. For more information :* [*https://www.uu.nl/staff/abailey*](https://www.uu.nl/staff/abailey)

Who is Ajay Bailey?

Ajay Bailey is an anthropologist by training, and a demographer. He's very interested in understanding people, behaviours, and actions, motivations and this kind of things. I'm very much curious about different actions, diverse experiences and choices that people make, that's what motivates me.

Can you tell us how home as a topic entered your research interests, doing what, with what kind of findings?

I think I didn't consciously start working on home as a concept. I started working on migration, from the times I did my master's, and I worked with migrant labourers in Goa, India. These are people who live in kind of illegal land, because of drought they were pushed to migrate from their villages to Goa. And my focus was really on risk behaviours, and health behaviours. What I realized a lot across the fieldwork was that home was such an important element. They lived on this illegal land, so there was this constant insecurity of when the house would be razed down and what would they take with them. There was so much uncertainty around that. But at the same time I saw that they had created a home with things that they had brought from their villages, like the door frame that was very intricately worked on and carved, and all the religious elements and cultural elements they had brought from their homes. This made me think: what does it mean for someone who lives here, who doesn't know tomorrow whether someone will come and raze down his house, to still make so much effort to recreate that sense of home through this material culture, practices, language, food, etc.? This started off my initial link in working around home and migration, which I continued to do later with skilled migrants in the Netherlands.

Could you find similar patterns in this regard among labour and skilled migrants?

The intensity is different. The opportunities are of course more for the skilled migrants, to travel back and forth, etc. But what remains quite stable is the material culture, food, commensality and

practices of commensality, and this presentation of a "safe space" that is possible because of these cultural elements. That's where they create a sense of family (and home).

So, safe spaces…

I remember this very clearly, in both cases: the migrant groups living in these illegal settlements would say "in this neighbourhood nobody can touch us, living in our house we are the lords of the house, nobody can attack us here", and skilled migrants would say "finally we come home and then we are in India again", and that's part of reconnecting to the idea that they can express their identities, their culture much more simply there.

So, there was also a sense of mastery over place…

Yes, definitely!

Can you expand also on what you mean by commensality, and why it matters?

Commensality comes from the idea of eating and sharing food together. This came up much more in my work among skilled migrants, food became such a central element. I started to think deeper about food, because food can also be very stereotypically present, right? Migrant food, and Indian food and that's it. But then I wanted to go deeper to find out what was it exactly about food. So it was not just the materiality of food itself, but with whom they shared this food, who was allowed to share this food with them, which groups (caste/religious/regional) could participate in this commensality. This started off a discussion on commensality, because commensality to a large extent determines the ingroup and outgroup, but in terms of very silent norms. For example, in a work among skilled migrant we saw that when they had the large general new year's festival in Kerala, because it's a traditional ceremonial meal, they would all eat vegetarian food. But when they have Christian or Muslim festivals they would share meat with their own groups but also with other Hindu groups. I remember a time when a Brahmin, vegetarian skilled migrant from Karnataka refused to socialise during work barbeque outings due to his uneasiness of the smell of meat.

So, if I were to ask you, as a social scientist, to define home, do you think you could find a definition, or would you find it irrelevant to find a definition?

It is difficult to give a definition. I think my own understanding of home has also changed over time. In the beginning I focused so much, as I said, on "safe spaces". Over time, and working with different groups, I realized that in some cases as social scientists maybe we romanticize home as well. There are other dimensions of home like the patriarchal home, gender norms, abuse, and other factors that play a role and we don't associate them with what home is. So home as a concept is much more complicated in the process. I would call home those spaces where people can feel free to express themselves.

The next question is perhaps even more slippery: is your own understanding of home at a professional level the same as at a personal level?

As an immigrant living in the Netherlands I have also come through many of these processes, so I kind of reflect on my own experience of how I see home, and home connections, practices of creating home, place-making and so forth. But on the other and I can also see that you also need to make that difference between not over-analysing what's happening around me. I can have that privilege to sit back and think about what my home is. So many people with a refugee background don't have that. For them it's about loss, about fleeing conflict and these kind of things. For me is about having transnational home-spaces, in that sense. When I call my dad I'm creating home through these conversations with him, like in India. Because we're talking about each other's homes, and that's different for me as well. I learn a lot from these processes, of how home changes over a period of time.

Sure. Based both on your professional and personal experiences, as a person with a migrant background, do you think that asking people questions like "where is home for you", "where do you feel at home" and so forth makes sense? Or does it hinder more than helping?

I actually have never asked "what home means to you" directly. I think that has come up more often as an analytical category from the different questions around belonging, interaction, integration, identity issues. I think home emerges there as an analytical element of that. When we worked with migrants in the Netherlands, home became an important element because they had moved to live in the shared living spaces, in co-housing with other older adults. Because there was a residential relocation there, we asked about what does “this home” mean to you?

But you wouldn't necessarily ask the same question to a migrant, or would you?

No, I wouldn't actually. I would rather see home as a combination of these elements that come together. Because, there's the other thing: when I asked these questions to skilled migrants, they would always conflate home and family. They would start by saying "in my home there are these other people who are living", so it would immediately go to the family. Or for some people home would also be referred to their village or the small community they came from. Or home could also mean deities or gods, in a religious perspective. We usually came talking about home through identity, through family, through connections back to people, friends and family, and so forth.

Moving back to India, how translatable is the notion of home, when it comes to hindi or any regional language in the country? Do you say the same thing with different words or do you say different things with different words?

As we were saying in speaking of home as conflict and home as family, I think home can have multiple meanings for people. In the language I come from home could mean family, but also the area or region where I'm from, but it could also be associated with people who belong to my home or larger extended family.

Would that mean ancestors?

They could be cousins or other people who are connected with me through my family. These are people from my home. We have a term in Kannada which is *mannejana*, and that means "people who belong to my home". It could be kin relations but also people who come from my region. In Hindi they would use the term *ghar* and the term *makaan* which does not have the same connotation as *ghar*. *Ghar* has this "home" connotation, whereas *makaan* has just a "house" connotation. So maybe I don't live there, it belongs to me but I may not be living there, but *ghar* is where I belong and live.

So that would work similarly to home vs house?

Yes. Anthropologists are focusing also on kinship rules around residence, like patrilocal residence, meaning you would move after your family to the husband's house and that would become your house. Or matrilocal, if the husband moves and so on. That also defines how people talk about home, in a sense.

I was actually very fascinated by your own experience. As I understand, you could use the word *manne* in your regional language, you could say *ghar*, you could also say *home* and you could even say *thuis*, in Dutch. So, would you be saying the same thing with four different words, or not?

We would be saying different things with these four words, yes. It depends so much on the context in which it has been spoken, actually. The context defines the co-construction of meaning with the participant on what home, food, commensality etc. mean.

Would you say that the mainstream bourgeoise argument of home as a space of intimacy, privacy, and family life in the western imaginary applies to India as well? Or do we need a more nuanced view, depending on class, ethnic background, caste or education? How far can we push the universality of home and how far is it instead cultural-specific?

Having lived in the Netherlands for so long, if I would compare with India, I would say that in the Western system leaving parental home is such a major disconnect. Meaning that it's a social norm that you leave at a particular age, and you marry, have children and set up a separate household. And these households are of course bound by relations, but in the Dutch context I'm often amazed by how much this disconnect actually is implemented immediately. In the Indian system of course you leave parental home to go study or work, but you don't leave to disconnect. You leave to set up new connections or new homes that are again connected to the central place where there's home. That push to creating another household independent of other households is not so prominent in India, because there your existence of home is to be always linked with the other homes that exist in the transnational or transregional space. That I found a key difference, otherwise family and other things remain quite similar.

And this interdependence keeps being important even after one migrates to Europe or other destinations?

Yes, especially what we see with Indian migrants is that the house is connected also through care networks, people would move around to provide care, most often to provide care for grandchildren or to be there during the birth of children, moving between houses in India and Europe, or other destinations. But also people moving back sometimes to provide care for older parents. The care network stays, but also financial networks still exist. The flow of remittances, flow of resources back and forth, of care capital that is exchanged, but also homes that move between generations. And maybe that's another thing: in the Dutch culture the home belongs to the parents, so the parents decide whether the person wants to sell that house or give it to the children through inheritance. But in the Indian context what we see in our data is that a lot of those houses are not seen as individually owned. They are family owned, family property. So the family decides how they want continue with the ancestral property. There can be very explicit agreements or silent agreements. For example, the one who stays behind to provide care and often inherits the property.

Thinking of migration and the materiality of home as a building, would you say that in general terms there is evidence of the argument of so-called remittance houses in India too? Migrants that invest in new, large, distinctive buildings and often do not end up living there, in some cases leaving them abandoned… how far is this the case in India?

It depends on the region. Some states are demographically shrinking, there are fewer and fewer people so in these areas the weekend houses, or houses of immigrants where people only come to stay for some seasons, is much more visible. Because the number of people who are left behind is much smaller. But in other states people also use remittances to invest into properties they rent out. In places where older adults do not have a pension, for example, or they have not been in the formal workforce, the rents they get from these homes become the pensions. So it adds into this economy of care that is passed on between migrant households.

Going back to your profession, trajectory and interdisciplinary background: what would different disciplinary backgrounds add to our understanding of home?

As anthropologists we focus always on the people: who are they, what are their relationships, their kinships, norms, actions and behaviours. The geographical dimension is: where does this actually take place? What is the home environment, what is the spatial context in which these relations are played out and home is constructed? The demographical element has more to do with how life course dynamics change and home requirements change, but people's dynamics within the home also change. I think that's how I would connect these three elements together.

So this leads us to the importance of the life course for what home means at different life stages. In the case of older adults, did you trace major differences in the ways of conceiving and feeling home between native and immigrant ones?

Yes, in a way. I think it's not so much about native or immigrant. As people age, they start to hold on to something that was from their past. What we've seen with Surinamese elderly is that it's not so much about being a Surinamese person, it was more about: what did I bring from there, what reminds me of home and what can I keep close to me. Because when people age their geography becomes smaller and smaller, then the home and its immediate neighbourhood becomes the most important place of activity. And then they want to keep closer those things that remind them of the past. I don't see so much the mobilities element there, of new things coming in, it's about keeping and memorializing what was already there from the past.

How important is religion, the religious background, in affecting how people view home and make themselves at home, particularly in India?

From a sentiment perspective, I think everyone is the same. But each religion has different rules on home. Christians or Muslims do not give so much relevance to where the kitchen is located, or where the entrance should be. Whereas some Hindu families follow *vastu shastra*. The ancient text told them which side should the kitchen face and on which side the entrance to the house should be. So they would take all these things into account when designing their house. That's from the material side. But practices of socialising also matter. If you do not belong to the same caste group, you only have access to some portions of the house, not to others. So the houses were also originally built for that. So the outer layer is where you could receive people from outer caste groups, and the inner parts of the house are reserved to people belonging to your own caste group. There the issue is about purity and pollution. If different caste member would share food or interact within the house then they would had the sense of being polluted. As you go from the outer to the inner parts of the house you have to maintain certain levels of purity.

However, even in an ordinary house in a western country I'm more likely to invite people, say, in the sitting room and not in my sleeping room. Would you see the same thresholds in the domestic space or there is more than that?

It depends on the activity. The outer layer is more for communal life, so they would say "I entertain you there but I don't have to share food with you". Because when I'm eating food or practicing religion I want to maintain the purity of the house. In the western countries the living room is a communal space. Of course you don't invite strangers to private spaces, you keep them within that communal space. Also things have changed, and not everyone practices the same way, but that kind of underlies micro-spatialities of difference within the house and how people maintain them.

How does gender play out in setting boundaries and boundaries of commensality, if it has an influence? Are women more involved?

I wouldn't say that women or men are stricter about these things. It's just like there are these domains they have control of. The kitchen is the domain where the women have to make sure, for example, that purity is maintained. But that's also changing, in the sense that there are more men and women who are cooking or participating in this. But gender could also play another role: what we saw with skilled migrants is that some women were not able to find work, post-migration. Even

though they are skilled and they would be eligible to work, but they aren't able to find work, either because their cultural capital was not recognized, or the skill gap that exists between what they studied and jobs available on the market. And then, women felt restricted to these homes. In a sense that they had jobs, they were participating in society earlier, and now they are stuck within these homes. Some of them withdrew from the society whereas some of them took that as an opportunity to start something new, for example small home-business such as selling home-cooked food or snacks to neighbours, or took up photography and started a studio inside the house. So home in that sense can have very different interpretations for women depending on the context in which they can make those decisions and opportunities available to them. And also for some older women, when they moved to the cohousing unit, this was the first time in their lives that they were living on their own. From birth, they were always from family member while this time they had a space that was just for themselves. And that also had very empowering effects on them, because they could decide how they wanted to put their homes, what they wanted in, whether they wanted to have plants or not, and so on.

In your view, is asking about home to people with and without a migrant background the same or is there a difference?

I wouldn't necessarily say migrant background but people who have also been immigrant themselves have different approaches to home. Even Dutch nationals who have lived abroad come back with a different approach towards home than those who never left the place. At some point of the life for them home has been somewhere else. And they have a very different experience of what home means for them. I remember some interviews in which when people would talk about their family in India back home, skilled migrants found that their Dutch colleagues who had lived abroad could better understand their feelings. Because they were also in this kind of displacement, being new in a foreign culture. They would understand them more because of the sense of being foreigner in a place.

Do you think you could understand them better than a native Dutch-born scholar, perhaps?

Well, I would have a different level of empathy, I think, in a sense of how I would ask those questions. But there's also the risk that if you come from the same culture people assume you know some things because you look similar. So at some point in my interviews with skilled migrants I had to tell them that I didn't know what they meant, they were assuming something I was not aware of. I think that also plays a role in this process. The natural curiosity that maybe a native person would bring to a certain setting may be different compared to interviewing a fellow migrant.

And if you were to ask questions about home to Dutch people, do you think that, relative to native-born scholar, would you approach it in the same way or in a different one?

If I would ask about home, for them home is where they're currently living. They would talk about their home and how it changed and so on, they would not talk about their family or homes that they've left behind. If you talk about home with a migrant, they would always bring back the family or previous homes at some point.

Do you think that asking about home in these cases may raise issues of being too intrusive, or going too much into the personal?

That's true. I think it also depends upon how you bring up the topic into the discussion. For example, in the interviews with skilled migrants in the beginning I asked them a lot about material culture, and then some of them were really confused. They were like: "why don't you want to know what kind of work I do, why do you want to ask me this?" Then I realized, "ok so I have to bring this topic up in another manner: when you first came in the Netherlands what did you bring in your suitcase?" And then that started off the discussion in a more natural way then asking them "what do you have from India in your home?", and then there was a lot of discussion.

Were there particular objects people would bring from India in their suitcases?

Most of the people I interviewed came from southern India, so I'd say the pressure cooker. Nowadays you can buy it here as well, but at the time you couldn't and that was something they would always bring, because you need the pressure cooker to boil dal and rice etc. Every Indian home has one pressure cooker, at least one! It is so popular in India because it helped people reduce the time spent cooking, and, importantly, less energy was used for this process. And then it went through the whole generations who used pressure cooker. For some of the immigrants the sound that the pressure cooker makes was an audible part of culture that was there, in the sense of a very sensory nature of what home meant for them. So a food element, but also using the pressure cooker connects them back to a sense of home through the senses.

So, the other important elements of home you told me are safety and ...?

Family, safety, connections... and the home is linked always to other homes, or other parts of the family who have homes. That creates a network in which people would embed themselves as well. And they would bring things from different homes to keep them in their homes as a way to connect to those homes. Objects as a way to connect symbolically, something from another home that is kept there. It doesn't have to be very shiny or ornamental, just something that was mundane in your previous home that is also mundane in the new home.

Could you figure out examples of this kind of objects?

Aside from the pressure cooker, people have certain kinds of clothes, or I remember they would have this Indian calendars, and I remember I asked them why they had these calendars. Indian calendars would also inform about festivals coming up, or other kind of rituals like fasting, so there is a religious element associated with calendars as well.

When you enter these people's houses, did you always meet your own expectations about what you would find there, or is there something you were surprised about? Which connects to the

question: is there an added value in entering people's homes, rather than chatting on skype or zoom for an interview?

Before visiting participants' homes, I spend more time in rapport establishment with them, to understand them first, before I could go into their homes. I felt more comfortable then in those situation in which there wasn't enough time to get to know each other and then we were suddenly there and they were uncomfortable. I think the connection has to be there beforehand, then it was easier. In places where I didn't have that time, I would have just some general talk about things in the house, so that you start connecting to things, like something that you also have at home, "oh, I also have this!!", so that starts that connection with the people, and then I would start the interviews. I had one surprising situation. It was not so different, usually in most places I start in the living room to do the interview, or around the kitchen table, but in one case the person took me all the way up to the attic and set a room there to talk because he was very particular "you're doing research, so you should be in a very quiet place". So, he was more serious about my research than I was myself! Which was a bit of a missed opportunity, because when I do interviews I also look around, walking around the house and start these probes and so on, and I was there sitting in this attic room!

This speaks to the imaginary of the researcher as a serious person that does not waste time with material culture and this kind of things… which is interesting.

Yeah, it is not always easy entering people's homes. In our research among older adults in India, many of them would not allow us inside their homes. We were not known by them, they were old and living on their own, they felt threatened by someone else coming in. Sometimes we even had to speak to their children living in the US and ask for permission before we could enter their homes. People are really insecure about unknown people coming inside their homes.

Has this to do more with insecurity conditions in India or with the fact that people did not know much about you and there was less of a rapport with them?
It is true about the insecurity condition, there are cases of people being robbed, people knocking to ask them to buy things, so that was the case. But once they came to know of us, and we gave them a letter and a badge and everything then it was easier.

If I were to ask you what is your lesson learned on how to do research on home, a kind of key teaching for people doing research on home, what would you recommend?

I think taking an interdisciplinary perspective on home is very useful. The combination of anthropology, demography and geography has benefitted me a lot – the intersection of looking at people in specific spaces and in their particular life course stages helped me better understand home and what means to them at different points in their life.

So, would you suggest that the life course position may be more important than, say, ethnicity or religion, as far as home is concerned?

I would say so. Life course position and, in some situations, socio-economic position also, in terms of availability of resources. Because if you have the ability to pay and live on your own, or to pay and live in a care home that's suitable for you, that also adds to a sense of home. We can theorize a lot about people, places and action, but if those people do not have the ability or resources or have those homes, it doesn't add to this discussion on the meaning of home.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

I think I would be interested, in the next phase, in examining home from the other side of it. So now we looked at it from belonging and similar perspectives, but you can also look at home from the other perspective of detaching from home: what are those processes, how do you un-belong to a home? How do you consciously try to go away from that place you used to call home, those relations, de-coupling with the past? I would be interested in how people un-belong to home.

So what would you like to investigate further, what could be a good field for you to research?

I think they are two sides of a coin. On one side, when we look at home from a belonging perspective, we look at all ways in which people move towards creating that sense of belonging to a home and a home-feeling. Looking at the other side we ask what do people do to leave behind particular kind of homes to set up new kind of homes. I don't think it's very different but it takes a different lens, maybe a more critical lens to look at home itself, and all kind of contestations that people may have of home. So, home as a place or condition people try to detach from, and not one they try to have access to.

This may be interesting for non-migrant people, as well.

Yeah, for both groups. We will see what comes up from this. There were also instances in which people left home because they were pushed out of home, but they were also consciously trying to leave away from a particular identity. What caught me thinking is that there could be certain processes that we overlook sometimes because we focus so much on belonging. People may make explicit efforts to detach themselves from home…

… to un-home themselves. So we should not assume that people always wish to reproduce and carry with themselves what was home for them!

Thanks so much, Ajay.

Selected articles on homes by A. Bailey

Pazhoothundathil, N., & Bailey, A. (2021). “This place is (now) my own home. It is my home till my death”: Older adults (re) creating home through daily rhythms and kinning in formal care settings. *Geoforum*. Vol. 124, pp. 207-216.

Pazhoothundathil, N., & Bailey, A. (2020). Cherished possessions, home-making practices and aging in care homes in Kerala, India. *Emotion, Space and Society*, *36*, 100706.

Bailey, A. (2017). The migrant suitcase: Food, belonging and commensality among Indian migrants in The Netherlands. *Appetite*, 110, 51-60.