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Perspectives on Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia

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2025

Abstract

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MA, Oklahoma State University, 1994

BS, Addis Ababa University, 1987

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia has garnered significant scholarly attention for its role in shaping ethnic identity, governance, and national cohesion. However, limited research has explored how this political structure affects Ethiopian diaspora communities. This study addressed the problem of increasing ethnic divisions among Ethiopian immigrants in the Denver metropolitan area, which challenges community integration and shared national identity. Despite the growing presence of Ethiopian Americans, the literature lacks an in-depth understanding of their perspectives on ethnic federalism. The purpose of this ethnographic qualitative study was to explore how Ethiopian immigrants in Denver perceive its impact on their social, political, and economic experiences. Guided by ethnic identity theory and federalism theory, the study employed semi-structured interviews with 10 purposively selected participants. Data was analyzed using open and axial coding through qualitative software. Participants reported that ethnic federalism institutionalizes ethnic division, fosters political fragmentation, and weakens national unity. They expressed a strong longing for cohesion and concern over the intergenerational transmission of ethnic division. Findings suggest that fostering unity, inclusivity, and civic engagement within the diaspora and between the diaspora and Ethiopia is essential for overcoming the challenges of ethnic federalism. Implications for social change involve providing information to policymakers, community leaders, and nonprofits to support community development that is inclusive of all ethnic groups.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my beloved wife, Elizabeth Moltot, whose unwavering love, patience, and steadfast support have been the foundation of this journey. Your strength carried me through every challenge, and your encouragement lifted me at every moment of doubt. You are the heart of my life and the soul of this accomplishment.

To my precious children, Heleena Alemayehu, Medan Alemayehu, and Kbir Alemayehu, your presence, joy, and love have been my daily source of inspiration. I hope this work stands as a testament to the power of perseverance, purpose, and faith.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my sisters and brothers, whose constant encouragement and belief in me have strengthened my resolve. Your support has been a quiet but powerful force in my life. To my entire family and friends in Ethiopia and across the globe, your resilience, strength, and prayers have shaped who I am. Thank you for walking with me, even from afar. And finally, to all the participants in this study, who generously offered their time and trusted me with their stories, this research would not have been possible without your voices. I am honored to have drawn on your experiences in this work. Above all, glory to God, who has sustained me through every step. To you be the honor, the gratitude, and the praise.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Study

Introduction

Ethiopia adopted ethnic federalism in 1991 following the collapse of the socialist military regime that had governed the country since the mid-1970s. Under that regime, declared in 1975, the ruling socialist vanguard class claimed hierarchical authority and centralized control over all societal groups. At its peak, as Pulliam (2021) mentioned, there was no meaningful separation of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Governance was carried out under the banner of democratic centralism, where recognizing diverse ethnic identities was viewed as a direct challenge to the authority of the ruling class.

The introduction of ethnic federalism marked a dramatic shift in Ethiopia's governance structure. According to Abbink (2006), this model quickly catalyzes ethnic tensions, regional disputes, and intergroup conflict. The Human Rights Watch World Report (2016) documented how ethnic-based violence and protests had become widespread throughout the country, resulting in numerous fatalities and the displacement of countless individuals. These developments suggested that ethnic federalism, while framed as a tool for inclusion, had exacerbated long-standing divisions.

In 2018, a change in political leadership raised hopes for reform. However, as Addis Standard (2019, September 23) reported, the new administration failed to introduce the structural changes necessary to address the root causes of Ethiopia's instability. Instead of dismantling the existing framework, the government opted to maintain ethnic

federalism as its guiding principle, which many believed was inconsistent with Ethiopia's complex social landscape and pressing governance challenges.

Historically, Ethiopia's ethnic federalism was seen by many as a foreign model, imported from other societies and ill-suited to the Ethiopian context. The classification of individuals based primarily on ethnicity drew parallels to apartheid-era South Africa and the former Soviet Union, where identity politics had undermined national cohesion. Mulugeta and Feseha (2021) argued that the modern Ethiopian state, formed in the late 19th century, was fundamentally incompatible with the principles of ethnic federalism. This system appeared especially problematic in a society where many individuals identified with multiple ethnic backgrounds or were uncertain about their ethnic affiliation.

The 2018 government's decision to uphold ethnic federalism raised serious questions about the policy's long-term viability. Many Ethiopians viewed the continued emphasis on ethnicity as a divisive force, hindering national unity and fueling instability. While some supporters contended that ethnic federalism offered historically marginalized groups a stronger voice in governance, critics feared that it entrenched rigid divisions and stalled democratic development.

Despite substantial scholarly attention to ethnic federalism, relatively little research has explored diaspora communities' perspectives, particularly those with strong cultural, political, and economic ties to Ethiopia. This study sought to examine how Ethiopian immigrants living in the Denver metropolitan area perceived and responded to

the policy of ethnic federalism. It operated on the assumption that the diaspora played a meaningful role in shaping the discourse surrounding Ethiopia's political future.

The study began by reviewing foundational theories of ethnicity. Ethnic groups were understood as subsets of society characterized by perceived or actual common ancestry, shared historical memory, and distinct cultural features such as language, religion, geographic origin, kinship, or physical appearance (Malesevic, 2006; Conerly et al., 2021).

The study then explored federalism concerning ethnicity, highlighting the conceptual debates and the specific role ethnicity played in Ethiopia's political history. The core focus of this qualitative inquiry was to assess whether ethnic federalism could serve as a unifying framework for Ethiopia, particularly amid widespread fear, political unrest, and democratic stagnation. Examples such as the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia and continued irredentist tensions in neighboring Somalia were also considered cautionary parallels.

The purpose of this dissertation was to capture Ethiopian immigrants' experiences and insights in metro Denver, offering a diaspora-informed perspective on ethnic federalism and its implications. Through this exploration, the study sought to contribute to broader discussions about national unity, identity, and governance in one of Africa's most ethnically diverse countries.

Background

Ethiopia possesses a rich and complex political history, with over 3,000 years of recorded governance, and has traditionally operated under a centralized system (Ministry

of Foreign Affairs, 2011). Until 1974, power was highly concentrated in the monarchy, leaving little room for local or regional autonomy. This changed when a socialist military regime came to power through a coup and remained in control until 1991. The new leadership further reinforced centralization, abolishing multiparty politics, freedom of expression, and independent civil society institutions, contributing to political stagnation and repression (BTI, 2024).

The military regime structured governance around a vanguard party model that eliminated the separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. This framework, rooted in "democratic centralism," rejected pluralism and labeled alternative identities as threats to party unity (Yonatan, 2010). During this period, individuals outside the ruling elite were systematically excluded from political participation, and the party itself was dominated by military personnel rather than civilian leadership, which further isolated opposing voices within Ethiopian society (Keller, 1985).

A response to this exclusionary system came in 1975 when the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) emerged and positioned ethnic identity as a key mobilization tool. This group promoted ethnicity as both a resource and a rationale for political organization, challenging centralized authority and advocating for group-specific self-determination (Desalegn, 2020; Vaughan, 2003). Unlike many African nations that avoided institutionalizing ethnicity, Ethiopia's transition under the TPLF embraced it. Ethnic federalism was introduced as a model for equitable representation, with proponents arguing that such a system could overcome historical injustices. However,

this approach sowed the seeds of future division, as recent analysis has demonstrated that ethnicity-based mobilization in post-1991 Ethiopia often created more fragmentation than cohesion (Birhan & Christopher, 2024).

Following the fall of the military regime in 1991, the TPLF-led coalition restructured Ethiopia as an ethnic federation. This fundamental change was implemented without a broad national dialogue or participation from many of the country's ethnic groups (SWP Berlin, 2024). Ethiopia, with a population exceeding 110 million and composed of more than 80 distinct ethnic groups, was reorganized into semi-autonomous regional states based on ethnicity (World Bank, 2015). Although proponents claimed this offered self-governance and constitutional protection for ethnocultural groups, critics warned that it encouraged ethnic isolationism and political manipulation (Bizuayehu & Fesseha, 2017).

The years following implementation revealed numerous challenges. Political elites and activists used ethnicity to entrench their power, often vilifying others while enhancing their group's status (Bekele, 2019). Internal minorities within dominant ethnic regions experienced exclusion and marginalization, undermining the federal promise of equal representation. A recent study found that even within large regions like Oromia, minority groups were often silenced or left without institutional recourse (Kasse & Woldemariam, 2023). These patterns have prevented the development of a shared national identity. Scholars examining federal structures have noted that the Ethiopian model amplified ethnic distinctions at the expense of cross-ethnic solidarity (Habtu, 2004; Mengisteab, 2001). Others have pointed out the unrealistic pursuit of ethnic

"purity," which has deepened resentment and mistrust between communities (Wimmer, 2002).

Freedom House (2024) reported that Ethiopia's ethnic federalism contributed to the erosion of civil liberties and the continued marginalization of both individuals and minority communities. The structure has allowed majority groups within each region to dominate politically and culturally, while internal minorities struggle for fundamental rights. Without strong institutions or legal safeguards, these minorities have remained vulnerable, and meaningful democratic development has been undermined (Kymlicka, 2006).

Ethnic federalism has also produced profound impacts on public institutions. An increase in ethnic-based conflicts in universities and higher education institutions has been documented since the policy's adoption (Mirresa, 2018). Regional states have become dominated by ethnically aligned political parties, including those from areas that previously supported centralized national governance (Goitom, 2019). According to the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI, 2024), ethnic-based territorial boundaries have contributed to growing political instability, increased territorial disputes, and eroded trust in state governance.

Among diaspora communities, the effects of ethnic federalism have been similarly disruptive. Reports from Ethiopian immigrants in the United States revealed widespread interpersonal fallout, with individuals citing the loss of friendships and strained interethnic marriages due to political division (Merie, 2017). Other diaspora scholars have warned that the Ethiopian community abroad remains fragmented, often

replicating homeland ethnic divides, preventing unified civic engagement and meaningful contribution to the host or home country (Lyons, 2009; Hailegebriel, 2012).

Although some scholars have argued that ethnic mobilization is a standard and manageable component of governance (Kymlicka, 2007), recent studies have revealed that Ethiopia's experience does not align with this optimistic view. The process was not built on inclusive democratic principles but was imposed top-down and manipulated by elite interests (Aemro & Christopher, 2024). This elite-driven federal arrangement, with weak institutions and an absence of shared liberal values, has prevented minority protection and increased interethnic mistrust (SWP Berlin, 2024).

Federalism theorists have emphasized that effective governance in multiethnic societies depends on strong institutions that uphold minority rights and national cohesion (Smith, 2000). In the Ethiopian context, however, the lack of democratic infrastructure has allowed majoritarian rule to prevail at the regional level, often at the expense of smaller communities (Fesseha et al., 2013). These systemic flaws continue to fuel ethnic violence, displace communities, and destabilize governance.

In summary, although ethnic federalism was intended to provide autonomy and justice for Ethiopia's diverse population, the evidence suggests it has deepened ethnic polarization, weakened democratic governance, and created long-term instability. These issues have extended beyond Ethiopia's borders, affecting diaspora communities. Given these dynamics, this study aimed to examine how Ethiopian immigrants in the Denver metropolitan area experienced, interpreted, and responded to the impacts of ethnic federalism both on their heritage and aspirations for Ethiopia's political future.

Problem Statement

Since the 1991 capture of political power by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a political ideology called ethnic Federalism came into materialization that aimed at ethnicity as a core strategy and element in Ethiopian politics. Gizachew (2019) wrote that in preference to ethnic Federalism, the government argued that fair allocation of resources is difficult in an increasingly centralized political system. Thus, the environment where the minority ethnic groups were not treated relatively within Ethiopia's unitary political system gave them the impetus to start a liberation movement to establish an ethnically federated Ethiopia.

Upon taking political power, this liberation movement did not democratically involve all ethnic minorities in deciding the country's political structure following ethnic Federalism as an ideology (Fessha, 2018). Taye (2017) argued that ethnic federalism was not a product of Ethiopia's initiative. Although the government claimed to prioritize the will of the people, it unilaterally established nine ethnically defined regional states and two federally administered city-states. This structure was introduced through a centralized directive and presented to the public as the most viable path to preserving national unity. Despite the fact that there are many alternatives to managing ethnically and socially divided societies, an ethnic federation can create peaceful coexistence. However, the ruling party opted for ethnic Federalism and presented it as an interesting notion to manage diversity by reconciling conflicting pressures to forge national unity.

In support, for instance, Bitwoded (2014) argued that the introduction of ethnic Federalism goes with the promotion of individuals in each ethnic group or tribe, setting

aside and having more affiliation for their ethnic group/tribe than their national state to ensure their equal existence. Thus, it is reasonable and proper that the liberation front that captured political power imposes that Ethiopia must experiment with ethnic Federalism. However, this state organization system was new to all Ethiopians at its initial imposition. At its initial imposition, this state organization system was new to all Ethiopians and offered the only choice to solve Ethiopia's presumed instability by the winning liberation front. Substantiating ethnicity as an emancipator, Berhanu (2007) states the creation of a new political system and administrative structures have been launched on the foundations of ethnic autonomy and ethnic equality that guaranteed a right for every ethnic group to have its own administrative unit as well as a right to develop and promote its own identity and language.

On the other hand, Abbink (2011) stated that the administration's challenges are significant since the introduction of ethnic Federalism, which makes Ethiopia distinct from other African nations, where ethnicity may influence politics but is not formally recognized as the foundational basis for governance. In some African nations, ethnically organized political parties are outlawed due to the inconsistencies exhibited upon application. Matthias et al. (2007) noted that although democratization in Africa is typically associated with multi-party systems, explicit exceptions are often made for political parties formed along lines of clan, community, ethnicity, religion, gender, language, region, race, sect, or tribe

Ethnic Federalism is inconsistent in many ways with forging democracy in multi-nationalities living together in relatively small areas. Kassaw (2018) reflected that

Ethiopian ethnic Federalism was troubled with internal inconsistencies because ethnic groups do not live only in a discrete territory but are dispersed across the country. Further, his research concluded that, on top of internal inconsistencies, Ethiopian ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia has faced criticism for its limited emphasis on cultivating a shared national identity and concerns over its ability to foster allegiance to a unified Ethiopian citizenship. With ethnicity positioned at the core of the country's political ideology, scholars have frequently examined the federal structure, some viewing it as a factor that exacerbates divisions, while others see it as a mechanism for managing ethnic tensions within a fragmented society (Gizachew, 2019). Alemante (2003), considering the Ethiopian predicaments, reflected that ethnic Federalism's track record as a source of overcoming instability and secession is arguably unjustified for a country without significant problems among ethnic groups, a history of unrestricted movement and relationship of people from different ethnic backgrounds within the country.

Many scholars have regarded the political institutionalization of ethnicity as problematic. Horowitz (1985) argued that using ethnic federalism as a framework for self-governance could intensify ethnic divisions by transforming ethnic grievances into political doctrines, rather than resolving underlying issues. Daba and Mulu (2017) also explained that adopting this new ideology into the state structure is problematic in various ways: from state autonomy politically and economically to the constitutional system itself. Thus, this political philosophy arouses conflict and disturbance in different parts (Abbink, 2011; Adegehe, 2009). Abbink (2011) and Almariam (2019) wrote that higher education institutions and other academic places exhibited this political dimension

significantly. Different scholars predicted the challenges as they could even cause disassociation and tribalism in the country and the diaspora.

Other collaborating findings by Michael (2008) reported that pursuing ethnicity as a concept and a primary identity in Ethiopia has created many Ethiopian life issues in their country and a diaspora. One of the significant challenges for many Ethiopian diasporas has been the reluctance to emphasize their ethnic identity at the top of their Ethiopian identity. Thus, expressing this reluctance, Thompson (2018) explained that the Ethiopian experiment of ethnic federalism is problematic in assimilating to other situations and creating individual freedom free of ethnic enclave thought and assimilation practices. One of the inconsistencies became one of the challenges in forging a peaceful society. For example, Legesse (2015) highlighted that Ethiopia's new ideological framework grants access to resources, employment opportunities, and regional benefits primarily to individuals residing within their designated ethnic homeland, while marginalizing those who do not share the dominant ethnic identity of that region. This application, in most cases, is cited as the cause of disturbance and ethnic conflicts between those who consider themselves as indigenous and those who are perceived as not belonging to that ethnic or tribe group created ab arbitrary lines in the historically assimilated society (Abbink, 2011; Adegehe, 2009).

Therefore, the track record of assimilation nationalism was deep-rooted in Ethiopia. Adopting a territorial form or ethnic form of Federalism does not do much for the over 80 ethnic groups with no specific territories to seclude themselves. After its introduction in 1991, multiple pseudo-political groups and student movements did not

welcome the notion of the federation on ethnic lines. Many student movements organized protests that combined social, religious, and ethnic issues, indicating inconsistency with a well-assimilated unitary system implemented in the past. University students, professors, and national elite groups aired their concerns by saying that institutionalized ethnic Federalism impedes Ethiopia's unitary state. A federal arrangement organized solely along territorial lines does not address this crucial problem and cannot constitute a solution to Ethiopia's diversity administration challenge. The linking of ethnicity and territory created an ethnic group without a domain and created the resentment that led to the robust displacements of some ethnic groups deemed aliens in their birthplaces, for example, the removal of nearly three million people in the Oromia region.

Thus, ethnic-based federalism has been the chokehold for many-faceted Ethiopian problems. Many student movements organized protests that combined social, religious, and ethnic issues incoherent with a well-assimilated unitary system implemented in the past. Furthermore, as Zahorik (2015) explained, clientelism, nepotism, lawlessness, ethnic favoritism, and repressive methods were exhibited by the dominant ethnic group in the territory named after itself. Thus, the Ethiopian experiment of ethnic Federalism is far from resolving the 'national question,' dragging most of the question of democracy and political debates to the limited category of ethnicity, urging for progress toward a better political system on democratic principles.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to critically examine the effectiveness and impact of Ethiopia's ethnic federalism in unifying the country's multicultural society, as perceived by

members of the Ethiopian diaspora residing in the Denver metropolitan area. The inquiry employed a qualitative ethnographic design to explore how Ethiopian immigrants in Colorado reflected on ethnic federalism based on their lived experiences in Ethiopia and their interpretations of its consequences from afar.

The study sought to understand how ethnic-based federalism shaped participants' perspectives on national identity, democratic governance, and interethnic relations. Findings from earlier investigations suggested that, despite the constitutional promise of self-rule, ethnic federalism had failed to adequately meet Ethiopian citizens' social, political, and economic needs (Amsalu, 2020). Ethnic federalism was seen by many as deepening ethnic cleavages and limiting inclusive national development.

Analyses of Ethiopia's political trajectory revealed that the rise of tribalism and ethnic conflict had escalated to the point of global concern, particularly among diaspora communities who observed the worsening crisis from abroad (Taye, 2017). The Human Rights Council (2021) and Freedom House (2024) reported that ethnic-based violence, displacement, and state repression had intensified since the adoption of ethnic federalism. From 2016 to 2018, Ethiopia experienced multiple waves of civil unrest, culminating in two states of emergency and a change in prime minister—yet the foundational issues linked to ethnic governance remained unresolved. More recently, the armed conflict between the Ethiopian National Defense Forces and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) escalated into a devastating civil war in the Tigray region, displacing millions and affecting the entire Horn of Africa (BTI, 2024; SWP Berlin, 2024).

Despite these consequences, dismantling ethnic federalism remained politically complex. Since its adoption, the system has solidified group identities and empowered elite actors who benefited from ethnic-based mobilization and governance structures. As Birhan and Christopher (2024) argued, ethnic federalism in Ethiopia entrenched identity-based politics, enabling regional elites to resist reform while claiming to represent historically marginalized communities.

Given these conditions, the contradiction between collective national identity and constitutionally entrenched ethnic sovereignty required a deeper understanding. This study, therefore, explored how Ethiopian immigrants in Denver made sense of this political tension between a desire for democratic unity and the persistence of ethnic division. By capturing their narratives and reflections, the research sought to contribute to the discourse on whether ethnic federalism is a unifying or fragmenting force in modern Ethiopia.

Research Questions

What are the perceptions of Ethiopian immigrants residing in the Denver metropolitan area towards the ethnic federalist system in Ethiopia, and do they believe that a demonstrated commitment to its principles could contribute to building a democratic, all-inclusive country that reflects common citizenship, thereby countering the prejudices inflamed by the politicization of ethnicity? Additionally, what recommendations might participants offer in this regard?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework of the Study

This study was anchored in the conceptual framework of ethnic Federalism, informed by the dynamic interplay between the constructs of Federalism and ethnicity. These two foundational concepts shaped the theoretical lens through which the perceptions of Ethiopian immigrants in the Denver metropolitan area were examined, particularly regarding the socio-political implications of Ethiopia's ethnic Federalism. Exploring these concepts' historical, ideological, and normative underpinnings enabled the study to critically interrogate the compatibility, contradictions, and tensions embedded in this governance model.

Federalism is a decentralized governance system used worldwide to accommodate pluralism, manage conflict, and enhance regional autonomy. However, its applicability is far from universal. Recent scholarship emphasized that federal systems must be contextually grounded, as their outcomes are shaped by the specific cultural, institutional, and historical frameworks in which they are embedded (Birhan & Christopher, 2024). Ethiopia's adoption of a federal structure based exclusively on ethnicity is a unique and controversial case. It offered constitutionally sanctioned autonomy to ethnolinguistic groups but, over time, gave rise to widespread political fragmentation, intergroup mistrust, and exclusionary governance (Kasse & Woldemariam, 2023).

The study's theoretical approach also drew heavily from ethnicity theory, particularly in understanding how ethnic identity has evolved from a cultural marker into a political instrument. As a socially constructed concept, ethnicity holds significant implications for governance in multicultural societies. In the Ethiopian context, ethnicity

has become institutionalized as the basis for state organization, often at the expense of civic-based identity and inclusive nationalism. This emphasis on ethnic belonging, above all else, has contributed to the reification of group boundaries and the politicization of collective memory. As contemporary reports indicated, this politicization fostered instability and exacerbated the fragmentation of national identity (SWP Berlin, 2024; Freedom House, 2024).

Ontologically, self-concept, as posited in liberal democratic traditions, centers on the individual as an autonomous, rational actor. This contrasts sharply with the collectivist model embedded in Ethiopia's ethnic Federalism, where identity and agency are mediated through group affiliation. The privileging of group rights over individual rights created systemic imbalances in representation and resource distribution. The framework thus incorporated the tension between primordialist and instrumentalist interpretations of ethnicity, highlighting the extent to which identity politics can either reinforce solidarity or sow division depending on institutional design and elite manipulation.

Furthermore, the study was informed by perspectives from cultural relativism and political culture theory, which helped unpack how values, norms, and collective perceptions shape the implementation and reception of Federalism. Cultural dimensions—such as respect for authority, attitudes toward autonomy, and interethnic trust—play a crucial role in shaping the success or failure of federal systems. Recent findings have shown that cultural distance and divergent historical narratives can

complicate power-sharing arrangements, particularly in deeply divided societies (Freedom House, 2024).

This conceptual framework enabled a multidimensional analysis of ethnic Federalism, not merely as a legal or structural arrangement but as a lived political reality shaped by history, identity, and diaspora memory. It provided an analytical basis to explore how Ethiopian immigrants, shaped by homeland experiences and host-country perspectives, made sense of ethnic Federalism's promises and failures. By situating the Ethiopian case within broader federalism and ethnicity discourses, the study aimed to contribute to ongoing debates about the viability of ethnic-based governance in pluralistic societies.

Nature of Study

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic research design to explore the perceptions of Ethiopian immigrants residing in the Denver metropolitan area regarding Ethiopia's ethnic federalism. Ethnography was selected as the most appropriate approach for capturing diaspora participants' lived experiences, collective memory, and cultural interpretations, particularly about how ethnic federalism shaped their views on identity, governance, and national cohesion.

The study relied on semi-structured interviews to collect in-depth narratives from individuals within the Ethiopian diaspora. This method allowed for open-ended engagement with participants' reflections on their experiences with Ethiopia's governance structure and its impact on ethnic relations, both historically and in the

present. The qualitative design effectively revealed the nuanced intersections of ethnicity, federalism, and diasporic identity, often missed by quantitative studies.

Qualitative inquiry, specifically ethnography, enabled the researcher to situate participants' perspectives within their broader socio-historical and cultural contexts. Recent scholarship has emphasized the value of ethnographic methods in uncovering the complexities of identity politics and state structures in conflict-affected societies (Birhan & Christopher, 2024). This approach provided flexibility to adapt to emerging themes and cultural expressions while remaining grounded in participants' authentic experiences.

Additionally, using interviews created space to examine how individuals made sense of institutional arrangements like ethnic federalism, including perceptions of exclusion, autonomy, or marginalization. Scholars have increasingly recognized that such qualitative methods are essential for understanding how decentralized governance and ethnicity interact in everyday life, particularly within displaced or transnational communities (Aemro & Christopher, 2024).

By engaging Ethiopian immigrants as narrators of their own political and cultural histories, the study contributed to a deeper understanding of how ethnic federalism has been experienced, interpreted, and remembered outside Ethiopia. The ethnographic nature of the research allowed the study to move beyond surface-level political analysis and instead illuminate the emotional, social, and identity-based dimensions of governance as seen through the lens of the diaspora.

Definitions

To ensure conceptual clarity, the following terms were defined as they were used in the study. These definitions were grounded in scholarly literature and adapted to reflect the political, social, and cultural context of Ethiopia's ethnic federalism and diaspora engagement.

Citizenship: Citizenship refers to the legal status of a person recognized as a member of a sovereign state, such as the United States, with accompanying rights, responsibilities, and protections under national law (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], 2010).

Collective memory: Collective memory describes the shared narratives and recollections that communities use to interpret historical events and shape present-day identity and political attitudes (Assmann, 2018).

Civic nationalism: Civic nationalism describes a form of national identity based on shared citizenship, democratic values, and allegiance to a unified state, rather than ethnic or cultural identity (Kymlicka, 2020).

Decentralization: Decentralization describes the transfer of authority from central government to regional or local governments, typically to improve responsiveness, representation, and resource distribution (Birhan & Christopher, 2024).

Diaspora: Diaspora denotes a transnational community residing outside their country of origin while maintaining cultural, political, or economic ties with the homeland (Pasura, 2011; Lyons, 2021).

Diaspora engagement: Diaspora engagement refers to the active participation of diaspora communities in homeland affairs, including cultural preservation, remittances, advocacy, and political activism (Lyons, 2021; Hailegebriel, 2022).

Displacement: Displacement refers to the forced relocation of individuals due to conflict, persecution, or systemic violence, often resulting in refugee status or diaspora identity (UNHCR, 2023).

Ethnic conflict: Ethnic conflict is a form of intergroup tension or violence arising from perceived differences in cultural identity, political exclusion, or resource competition, often rooted in historical grievances (Smith, 2010; Aemro & Christopher, 2024).

Ethnic federalism: Ethnic federalism is a model in which subnational regions are organized along ethnolinguistic lines, allowing ethnic groups formal self-governance. In Ethiopia, this system institutionalized ethnic identity as a basis for political representation and regional autonomy (Kasse & Woldemariam, 2023; SWP Berlin, 2024).

Ethnicity: Ethnicity refers to a collective identity based on shared cultural markers such as language, religion, ancestry, and traditions. These identifiers often shaped social cohesion and political mobilization (Smith, 1988; Wimmer, 2020).

Federalism: Federalism refers to a system of government in which political authority is constitutionally divided between central and subnational units, with each level exercising autonomy in specific domains (Paleker, 2006; Birhan & Christopher, 2024).

Governance: Governance denotes the systems, processes, and norms through which authority is exercised, decisions are made, and public resources are managed in a state or institution (World Bank, 2020).

Identity politics: The mobilization of political interests around shared identity categories such as ethnicity, religion, or language, often shaping access to power, rights, and recognition (Wimmer, 2020).

Marginalization: Marginalization describes the process by which individuals or groups are excluded from political, social, or economic participation due to structural inequalities or identity-based discrimination (Freedom House, 2024).

Multiculturalism: Multiculturalism refers to a framework for recognizing, respecting, and accommodating cultural diversity within a society, encouraging multiple ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups to coexist (Kymlicka, 2020).

National identity: National identity refers to a collective sense of belonging to a political community, often based on shared citizenship, values, and symbols that transcend ethnic divisions (Freedom House, 2024).

Political elites: Political elites refer to individuals or groups who hold disproportionate influence over political decision-making and governance, often shaping institutional frameworks and public narratives (SWP Berlin, 2024).

Self-determination: Self-determination refers to the right of a people or group to freely determine their political status and pursue economic, social, and cultural development, often invoked in ethnic autonomy claims (United Nations, 2007).

Assumptions

Assumptions played a critical role in shaping the trajectory of this qualitative ethnographic study. These foundational beliefs informed the methodological orientation of the research, the interpretive lens used in the analysis, and the relational dynamics between the researcher and participants. While not empirically testable, these assumptions were necessary to frame the study's inquiry and ensure data collection and interpretation integrity. This qualitative ethnographic study was guided by a set of foundational assumptions that supported its methodological approach and interpretive lens. Although not empirically testable, these assumptions were essential to framing the inquiry, ensuring ethical engagement with participants, and interpreting data with cultural and contextual sensitivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

One core assumption was that participants engaged in the study voluntarily and shared their experiences with honesty and autonomy. This belief upheld the ethical principles of qualitative research and underscored the importance of informed consent, particularly when exploring politically sensitive issues such as ethnic federalism (Patton, 2015). The authenticity of participant narratives was presumed to reflect their lived experiences and perspectives without coercion.

The study also operated on the understanding that the Ethiopian immigrants residing in Denver offered culturally and politically diverse perspectives reflective of broader diaspora dynamics. While the sample was not statistically representative, it was assumed that participants carried personal and collective memories that could illuminate the complexities of Ethiopian identity, migration, and community life (Merie, 2017;

Lyons, 2021). Another assumption involved the expectation that participants maintained emotional, cultural, and political ties to Ethiopia. These transnational attachments were believed to inform their views on identity, governance, and national belonging, shaping their interpretations of Ethiopia's federal arrangement from a distance (Haile Gebriel, 2012; Brubaker, 2005). Additionally, it was assumed that the impacts of ethnic federalism extended beyond Ethiopia's borders, influencing diaspora cohesion and social relationships. The study presumed that ethnic-based divisions experienced in Ethiopia could resurface within diaspora communities, shaping patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and civic engagement (Tadesse & Berhanu, 2020; Fesseha & Hersi, 2022).

Finally, the research was grounded in the belief that Ethiopia's ethnic federalism, while designed to foster autonomy, posed significant challenges to national unity, democratic ideals, and inclusive identity formation. This assumption acknowledged that structural governance models affect how people perceive justice, legitimacy, and belonging dynamics that were expected to emerge in participants' narratives (Aemro & Christopher, 2024; Alemayehu, 2020). Together, these assumptions guided the research design and interpretation, supporting a nuanced exploration of how Ethiopian immigrants in Denver experience and reflect on ethnic federalism and its diasporic implications.

Scope and Delimitations

This qualitative ethnographic study focused on exploring how Ethiopian immigrants residing in the Denver metropolitan area perceived Ethiopia's ethnic federalism and its implications for constructing a shared national identity. The scope of the study was geographically limited to metro Denver, where a sizable and active

Ethiopian diaspora community resides. The inquiry centered on participants' sense of belonging, perceived inclusion in national narratives, and reflections on how ethnic federalism influenced their understanding of unity, democracy, and ethnonational identity.

The research was delimited by its focus on diaspora perceptions rather than the operational mechanisms of federal institutions within Ethiopia. Accordingly, the study did not engage in institutional or comparative analyses of federalism across other African or global contexts. Instead, it examined how members of the Ethiopian diaspora interpreted ethnic federalism from a transnational perspective and how these interpretations were shaped by memory, identity, and lived diasporic experiences (Hailegebriel, 2012; Lyons, 2021).

This study also did not attempt to represent the full range of Ethiopia's more than 80 ethnolinguistic groups. While deliberate efforts were made to include participants from major ethnic communities residing in the Denver area, the findings are not generalizable to all Ethiopian diaspora populations in the United States. Nationally, the Ethiopian immigrant population exceeds one million, with significant concentrations in cities like Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and Seattle (Pew Research Center, 2021). In contrast, Colorado's foreign-born population is approximately 549,181, about 10% of the state's total, and the Ethiopian community in metro Denver is estimated at around 30,000 (American Immigration Council, 2020; Semanco, 2016). Though regionally significant, the Denver Ethiopian community reflects a localized subset of the broader diaspora. Cultural contributions from this community, such as the annual Taste of Ethiopia

Festival, further underscore its visibility and influence within Colorado (Beyond the Nest, 2018). Nevertheless, the study's conclusions remain bounded by the demographic and geographic characteristics of its sample and should not be extrapolated to all Ethiopian diaspora communities or to Ethiopia as a whole.

The dual role of the researcher as both a community organizer and academic investigator constituted another delimitation. While this role enhanced rapport and access to participants, it also required clear boundaries to mitigate potential biases. The study followed ethical protocols to ensure that data collection and analysis remained rigorous, impartial, and rooted in scholarly integrity (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Methodologically, the study was limited to semi-structured interviews, which, while rich in narrative depth, are inherently subjective and reliant on participant recall. Although care was taken to ensure authenticity and clarity in participant responses, the study acknowledged the limitations of self-reported data in terms of accuracy and completeness.

Finally, this research did not aim to evaluate federalism as a general theory or political framework. Rather, it concentrated on how Ethiopia's ethnic federalist model was perceived by a particular diaspora community and how it affected their aspirations for unity and shared national belonging. Broader dimensions, such as economic development or institutional governance, were considered only to the extent that they surfaced within participants' narratives.

Limitations

This study encountered several limitations that shaped both its methodological approach and the interpretive boundaries of its findings. One notable limitation was the potential for selection bias during participant recruitment. Individuals who agreed to take part in the research may have held specific political viewpoints or migration experiences that are not broadly representative of the wider Ethiopian immigrant population in Denver or other diaspora hubs. As highlighted in qualitative research literature, voluntary participation in politically sensitive studies often results in a sample skewed toward those with strong opinions or personal connections to the topic (Guest et al., 2020).

Geographic scope also served as a key constraint. The study focused solely on Ethiopian immigrants residing in the Denver metropolitan area, a region with its own unique sociocultural and organizational context. As such, the findings may not fully capture the experiences or perceptions of Ethiopian immigrants living in larger or more politically active diaspora communities such as those in Washington, D.C., Minneapolis, or Los Angeles. This limitation is consistent with other ethnographic inquiries, where location-specific dynamics influence the depth and transferability of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

Participant diversity presented additional interpretive complexity. Ethiopia's population comprises over 80 ethnolinguistic groups, and the diaspora reflects this heterogeneity to varying degrees. In Denver, differences in ethnic background, religious affiliation, length of time since migration, and past political involvement influenced how participants understood and articulated their perspectives on ethnic federalism. As

Chacko (2021) noted, diaspora identities are multifaceted and shaped by overlapping local and transnational experiences, requiring nuanced interpretation.

The reliance on narrative interviews introduced further epistemological limitations. Participants' memories, emotional states, and cultural storytelling frameworks may have influenced the framing of their responses. Given the political trauma many carried, recall bias or selective memory was possible. These dynamics are common in narrative inquiry, where meaning-making is influenced not only by fact but also by interpretation and emotional resonance (Sools, 2020).

The researcher's dual identity as both a community advocate and academic introduced the possibility of role confusion and interpretive bias. Although measures were taken to separate community leadership from research responsibilities, the researcher's position may have subtly shaped the openness of participant responses or the interpretation of themes. Reflexivity and ongoing awareness of this dual role were crucial throughout the research process (England & Simon, 2020).

Finally, the sensitive nature of the topic, ethnic federalism, and its associated political implications may have discouraged some individuals from participating or inhibited full candor during interviews. Despite assurances of confidentiality and nonjudgmental listening, concerns about political reprisal, social cohesion, or emotional vulnerability could have constrained the range of responses (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insight into the lived experiences and perceptions of a key segment of the Ethiopian diaspora. While the findings are not universally generalizable, they provide an important foundation for

further inquiry into how diaspora communities negotiate identity, memory, and belonging in the context of homeland political structures.

Significance

This study was designed to examine the perceptions of Ethiopian immigrants regarding the contemporary state of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia and its associated multi-faceted challenges. The significance of this research stemmed from the widespread impact ethnic federalism has had on Ethiopians both within the country and across the diaspora. Many members of the Ethiopian diaspora have experienced displacement, exclusion, or marginalization as a result of the politicization of ethnic identity and the implementation of ethnic federalist policies (Birhan & Christopher, 2024).

Although ethnic federalism was established to foster democracy and self-determination among Ethiopia's diverse groups, its long-term outcomes have been increasingly contested. Instead of serving as a unifying governance model, it has been argued that ethnic federalism exhibits characteristics of ethnocracy, a system in which power is disproportionately concentrated in the hands of one or more dominant ethnic groups to the detriment of the broader population (Yiftachel, 2006). This dynamic has often exacerbated ethnic tension and political instability rather than promoting national cohesion (Birhan & Christopher, 2024).

This exploratory study sought to address the absence of grassroots-level, diaspora-based inquiry into Ethiopian ethnic federalism by capturing the nuanced perceptions of Ethiopian immigrants living in the Denver metropolitan area. The significance of this research was twofold: first, it contributed to the limited body of

scholarship examining diaspora perspectives on ethnic governance in Ethiopia, and second, it offered a platform for reflecting on the potential of inclusive dialogue within and beyond diaspora communities (Lyons, 2021).

Participants in the study were assumed to hold profoundly personal and politically shaped perspectives, particularly given that many had left Ethiopia in response to ethnic-based violence or exclusion. Their lived experiences offered critical insights into how policies enacted in Ethiopia continue to shape identity, belonging, and social relationships abroad (Chacko, 2021). This study, therefore, aimed to shed light on how Ethiopian immigrants interpret the viability of ethnic federalism as a political arrangement and whether it has fulfilled its promise of equality, autonomy, and peace.

The research also held significance due to the size and influence of the Ethiopian community in Denver, which is considered one of the largest Ethiopian immigrant populations in the Western United States (Semanco, 2016). Despite this, scholarly research into this population's political views and cultural dynamics remained limited. By focusing on their experiences, the study filled a critical gap in the literature regarding how immigrants perceive and respond to the political structures of their homeland, especially when those structures remain contested and unresolved (Lyons, 2021).

Moreover, this research served a broader social and cultural purpose. It aimed to promote dialogue within Ethiopian diaspora communities about identity, reconciliation, and coexistence. By moving beyond politicized ethnic divisions, the study encouraged a reimagining of shared civic identity rooted in mutual respect and democratic engagement.

In doing so, it sought to contribute to more informed and inclusive conversations on Ethiopia's future governance.

From a methodological standpoint, the study demonstrated the value of ethnographic inquiry in diaspora contexts. Qualitative interviews enabled a rich exploration of meaning-making, memory, and political interpretation within a specific cultural and geographic setting (Creswell & Poth, 2021). The study also served as a model for engaging diaspora communities in discussions about national politics and cultural identity from an emic, experience-driven perspective.

Finally, this study held policy relevance for both Ethiopian and international stakeholders. As ethnic conflict and displacement continue to affect Ethiopian society, understanding diaspora perspectives can inform future efforts toward peacebuilding, political reform, and transnational civic engagement. The findings offered a unique diaspora-based viewpoint that enriched broader discourses surrounding Ethiopia's federalism, democratization, and post-conflict recovery (Birhan & Christopher, 2024).

Positive Social Change Implications

This exploratory ethnographic study was designed to foster collaborative efforts aimed at promoting national reconciliation and unity among Ethiopians. Its primary goal was to cultivate mutual understanding among the country's diverse ethnic groups by emphasizing peaceful coexistence, civic identity, and collective well-being. The study moved away from positioning ethnic identity as the sole determinant of governance and instead explored pathways to inclusive nationhood. By engaging Ethiopian immigrants in meaningful dialogue about ethnic federalism, the research expanded current knowledge

and provided insights for community leaders, policymakers, and concerned citizens seeking a more just and democratic Ethiopia (Lyons, 2021).

The study investigated how Ethiopian immigrants interpreted the growing interethnic violence and the marginalization faced by smaller ethnic groups. These insights were particularly valuable in considering alternative governance models or federal arrangements that could promote equity and reduce tension across ethnic boundaries. Ethnic federalism, while initially intended to recognize the rights of historically marginalized communities, has, in practice, often intensified group-based identity politics and conflict (Birhan & Christopher, 2024). By examining how these dynamics were perceived from the vantage point of the Ethiopian diaspora, this study offered a transnational lens to reimagine federal design through a more inclusive and cohesive framework.

Focused on the Ethiopian immigrant population in the Denver metropolitan area, this research shed light on the social dynamics and political awareness within diaspora communities. Though geographically removed from Ethiopia, participants remained deeply connected to their homeland and brought unique perspectives informed by their displacement, memories, and aspirations for national unity. As Chacko (2021) explained, diasporas are not politically disengaged but are often agents of cultural continuity, resistance, and transformation. This study thus amplified the voices of Ethiopian immigrants who may otherwise be excluded from formal decision-making processes but continue to influence discourse on peacebuilding and identity through advocacy and community mobilization.

Furthermore, the study's findings held significance beyond Ethiopia, offering insights into immigration policy, community development, and health equity initiatives that affect Ethiopian immigrants in the United States. Understanding how structural violence and ethnopolitical trauma shape immigrant narratives can inform culturally competent mental health support, public safety strategies, and inclusion frameworks (Creswell & Poth, 2021). For Colorado, home to one of the most visible Ethiopian communities in the western U.S., this research provided locally grounded data that may aid nonprofit organizations, civic institutions, and public health agencies in developing more responsive services.

Ultimately, this research aimed to enrich scholarly and practical understandings of Ethiopian ethnic federalism and diaspora identity. It underscored the importance of viewing ethnicity not as a rigid criterion for federal division but as a dynamic element of cultural heritage that must be balanced with democratic values and inclusive governance. The study encouraged community-based dialogue and policy reflection, advocating for a federal model that prioritizes the dignity and inclusion of all Ethiopian citizens, regardless of ethnic background. In doing so, it contributed to the growing body of work that views diasporas as vital stakeholders in shaping political futures across borders (Lyons, 2021; Chacko, 2021).

Summary

The first Chapter established the foundation for this ethnographic inquiry into the perceptions of Ethiopian immigrants in the Denver metropolitan area regarding Ethiopia's ethnic federalism. It traced the historical trajectory of the country's transition

from a centralized imperial and socialist governance system to a federal model grounded in ethnic identity, implemented after the 1991 political shift. While the ethnic federalist system was introduced to promote autonomy and equal representation for Ethiopia's diverse nationalities, it has generated widespread critique for entrenching divisions, fueling interethnic violence, and undermining national cohesion. These tensions formed the basis of the problem statement and underscored the relevance of exploring how Ethiopian diaspora communities understand and interpret the federal system from afar.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how Ethiopian immigrants in Denver perceive the impacts of ethnic federalism on their homeland's political stability, national identity, and prospects for democratic governance. Employing an ethnographic approach, the study prioritized the voices of diaspora participants whose lived experiences, political memory, and social positioning offer a rich source of insight. The conceptual framework drew from theories of ethnicity, federalism, identity politics, and transnational engagement to examine how ethnic federalism is internalized, resisted, or reimagined across cultural and spatial boundaries.

Chapter 1 also outlined the assumptions that shaped the research design, including interviewees' voluntary and honest participation, the diversity within the Ethiopian immigrant community, and the relevance of diaspora perspectives in homeland political discourse. The scope and delimitations clarified the study's focus on a specific geographic and cultural context, recognizing that the findings are not intended to generalize to all Ethiopian diaspora populations. Limitations such as potential selection bias, narrative subjectivity, and the researcher's dual role were acknowledged, along with

the study's significance in advancing dialogue on national unity, inclusive governance, and diaspora civic participation.

The chapter concluded by discussing the study's potential for positive social change. By exploring how Ethiopian immigrants engage with the complex legacies and consequences of ethnic federalism, the research contributes to broader conversations about institutional reform, reconciliation, and democratic renewal. It also provides a platform for marginalized voices and promotes inclusive thinking around national identity and governance. the next chapter presents a comprehensive review of the literature relevant to the study's central themes, including the evolution of federalism in Ethiopia, the theoretical underpinnings of ethnic federalism, and the role of diaspora communities in political transformation. The chapter also included the historical and ideological origins of ethnic federalism and situates Ethiopia's experience within comparative global contexts. It then explores scholarly perspectives on the consequences of ethnicity-based governance, highlighting both the promises and pitfalls of institutionalizing ethnic identity. The literature review also examines how diaspora communities, particularly Ethiopian immigrants, navigate national belonging, political memory, and transnational activism issues. Chapter 2 lays out the theoretical and empirical groundwork for understanding the perceptions explored in this ethnographic study by critically synthesizing existing research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter reviews scholarly literature relevant to the study's exploration of Ethiopian ethnic federalism from the perspective of the Ethiopian diaspora in Denver. Building on the conceptual foundation established in Chapter 1, this literature review critically examines the key constructs of **ethnicity** and **federalism**, with particular attention to their intersection within the Ethiopian political context. The aim is to trace how these concepts have been theorized, debated, and applied while identifying gaps that justify the present ethnographic inquiry.

The chapter is organized around two central concepts, ethnic identity and federalism, which form the study's conceptual framework. These concepts have played a pivotal role in shaping Ethiopia's modern governance structure and continue to provoke national and transnational debates about inclusion, representation, and unity. While both concepts are widely studied in global contexts, their application in Ethiopia has produced unique institutional and social dynamics that merit deeper analysis.

This review begins by exploring the theoretical underpinnings of ethnicity, mainly as it has evolved in Ethiopia through kinship-based affiliation, historical narratives, and political mobilization. Ethnic identity in Ethiopia is inherited and socially constructed, shaped by ancestral lineage and shifting political interests. As such, identity often becomes a strategic tool for accessing resources, asserting autonomy, or resisting marginalization.

The chapter then examines the evolution of federalism as a political and constitutional system, emphasizing normative federal theory and its justifications. Federalism is broadly defined as a governance structure in which authority is constitutionally divided between multiple levels of government. In theory, federalism balances unity and diversity, allowing for self-rule at the subnational level while maintaining collective statehood. However, adapting this model in Ethiopia through ethnic federalism has generated significant tension. Rather than fostering cooperation among diverse groups, it has arguably reinforced ethnic boundaries and fueled exclusionary politics (Birhan & Christopher, 2024).

The literature review further addresses Ethiopia's historical and political trajectory leading to the adoption of ethnic federalism in 1991, examining how the policy was positioned as a corrective to centralization and ethnic marginalization. However, as noted by several scholars, the Ethiopian case remains under-theorized in federalism literature, particularly regarding the long-term social consequences of identity-based governance and the role of diaspora communities in shaping national narratives (Chacko, 2021; Kasse & Woldemariam, 2023).

This chapter lays the theoretical groundwork for the study by synthesizing key scholarship on federalism, ethnicity, and the Ethiopian experience. It provides the conceptual and historical context needed to analyze participants' perspectives and situates the research within broader academic and policy discussions on governance, identity, and national integration.

Literature Search Strategy

To establish a comprehensive foundation for this study, an extensive literature search was conducted using a combination of academic databases, institutional libraries, and internationally recognized resources. Primary searches were carried out through Walden University's library, the University of Denver library, and Addis Ababa University's online library portal. Google Scholar was also used to access a broad range of peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books, and relevant gray literature concerning ethnic federalism and diaspora identity.

Advanced searches were conducted through academic databases including Thoreau Multi-Database Search, EBSCOhost, PsycINFO, ProQuest Central, ABI/INFORM, Academic Search Complete, and JSTOR. These databases were selected for their interdisciplinary reach, especially in political science, anthropology, sociology, and migration studies. Full-text and peer-reviewed filters were applied, and Boolean operators were used strategically to refine and expand search results.

Given the scarcity of peer-reviewed sources directly addressing the Ethiopian diaspora's perception of ethnic federalism, the search parameters were expanded to include literature published between 2000 and 2024. This broader timeframe ensured the inclusion of both foundational texts and recent scholarly contributions relevant to the study's conceptual framework.

Search terms included *ethnic identity, ethnic federalism, Ethiopian diaspora, federalism and governance in Africa, ethnic conflict in Ethiopia, diaspora engagement, emigration and ethnic policy, democracy and ethnicity*, and *group rights versus*

individual rights. Additional terms such as *corruption and ethnic federalism, Ethiopian immigrants in Denver, interethnic relations in the diaspora*, and *human capacity building in federal systems* were also utilized to capture the multifaceted aspects of the research topic.

Supplementary data and context were gathered from international organizations and policy sources, including the United Nations Digital Library, the World Bank Documents and Reports Center, and Foreign Policy magazine. These resources provided demographic and institutional insights essential for understanding the broader implications of ethnic federalism in both homeland and diaspora contexts.

This multi-source search strategy yielded a diverse and contextually rich body of literature. The scholarly works selected contributed to a nuanced understanding of the theoretical, empirical, and policy dimensions of ethnic federalism as it relates to diaspora identity and engagement. All cited materials are documented in the reference section by APA 7th edition guidelines.

The Iterative Search Process

In the initial phase of the literature search using the Thoreau Multi-Database Search, I entered the term *ethnic federalism* and retrieved 445 results. I added *Ethiopia* to the second search line to narrow the scope, which reduced the results to 296 articles. A refined search was then conducted by entering *ethnic* in the first search bar, *"federalism"* in the second, and *Ethiopia* in the third. This yielded 131 peer-reviewed articles published between 2019 -2023. However, after reviewing the abstracts and full texts,

many of these studies did not directly address perceptions of ethnic federalism in the Ethiopian context.

To further refine the search, I limited the publication range to the past five years, which resulted in 93 peer-reviewed articles. In another iteration, I searched using the terms *perception, ethnic federalism,* and *Ethiopian* across the three search bars. This query returned only three articles, which were reviewed in depth. A final search using only the first two terms while leaving the third search bar blank produced seven additional articles relevant to this study's focus.

A similar approach was applied using Google Scholar and other databases such as ProQuest, EBSCOhost, and JSTOR. While many articles were retrieved through these platforms, only a subset directly addressed the perception of ethnic federalism in the Ethiopian context. Nonetheless, after thorough evaluation, several sources obtained through these searches contributed meaningfully to this study's theoretical framework and contextual grounding (Walden University Library, n.d.; Google Scholar, n.d.).

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual frameworks served as critical tools for guiding this study, offering a structured approach to organizing, interpreting, and analyzing the complex relationship between ethnicity and federalism in the Ethiopian context. They enabled the identification of key concepts, variables, and interrelationships while illuminating gaps in the literature and informing the study's direction (Maxwell, 2021; Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). Conceptual frameworks not only shaped the research design but also provided the

intellectual structure necessary to explore the nuanced perceptions of Ethiopian immigrants concerning ethnic federalism.

This study drew on two foundational concepts: ethnicity and federalism. Ethnic identity theory framed how ethnic affiliation is constructed and contested across social, political, and historical lines. Federalism theory, meanwhile, informed an understanding of the governance structure in which power is constitutionally distributed across levels of government. Together, these frameworks illuminated the tensions between identity and state organization in Ethiopia (Yemane & Christopher, 2024).

Exploring ethnic federalism in Ethiopia necessitated a theoretical inquiry into the compatibility and friction between these concepts. Scholars such as Turton (2006) posited that ethnic federalism presumes ethnicity as the fundamental organizing principle in states composed of multiple ethnic groups. However, the application of this model in Ethiopia has produced uneven outcomes, raising critical questions about its democratic efficacy and societal impact (Fessha & Hersi, 2022).

Federalism has historically evolved across varying political and geographic contexts. Its modern intellectual roots can be traced back to foundational thinkers like Madison and Mill and were later expanded by contemporary scholars, including Elazar (1987), Riker (2007), and Watts (2008), who emphasized the principles of autonomy, power-sharing, and intergovernmental trust. Riker's model of federalism, for example, viewed federations as political bargains formed under military or geopolitical pressures (Riker & Follesdal, 2007).

Paleker (2006) contributed to federalism discourse by outlining three categories of federal theory: the classical theory, which emphasized legal autonomy between levels of government; the origin theory, which included sociological and political catalysts for federation; and the functional theory, which examined the operational dynamics of federal systems. These theoretical strands helped contextualize how federal structures function under varying pressures, insights particularly relevant in assessing Ethiopia's ethnic federalism.

Despite these established models, critics have pointed out that traditional theories of federalism often fail to address the challenges of multiethnic or multinational states. The Ethiopian case illustrates how identity-based federalism can simultaneously accommodate diversity while deepening divisions, necessitating a framework that captures this paradox (Aemro & Christopher, 2024).

In synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, this study applied a conceptual framework that accounted for federalism's normative ideals and practical challenges in a multiethnic context. It also incorporated contemporary scholarship on diaspora identity and political memory to understand how Ethiopian immigrants construct meaning around ethnic federalism from abroad (Chacko, 2021).

The theories of ethnicity and federalism formed a dual lens through which to examine how identity, governance, and belonging intersect in homeland and diaspora experiences. This conceptual framework offered the necessary structure to explore Ethiopian immigrants' perceptions in Denver and assess the broader implications of ethnic federalism for national unity, institutional design, and inclusive governance.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

The policy of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, institutionalized under the 1995 Constitution, is a central variable in understanding the social and political perceptions of Ethiopian immigrants, including those residing in Denver. Ethnic federalism, designed to empower Ethiopia's diverse ethnic groups through decentralized governance, has generated widespread debate both within the country and among its diasporas. Theoretically rooted in the principle of ethno-linguistic self-determination, this framework has been criticized for fostering ethnic fragmentation, political polarization, and weakening national unity (Aalen, 2011; Abbink, 2014).

For Ethiopian immigrants in the United States, the policy carries complex emotional and political implications. Literature on transnationalism and diaspora identity suggests that homeland politics significantly influence the civic engagement, identity formation, and political attitudes of diasporic communities (Vertovec, 2009; Lyons & Mandaville, 2012). Ethiopian immigrants often carry historical memories and lived experiences shaped by ethnic federalism, which in turn inform their perceptions of ethnic identity, governance, and national belonging abroad (Taye, 2021).

Emerging studies on Ethiopian diaspora communities in North America highlight a growing concern that ethnic federalism contributes to divisions even outside Ethiopia, impacting communal cohesion and diaspora advocacy (Woldemariam, 2020; Desta, 2022). For Denver's Ethiopian population, comprised of Amhara, Oromo, Tigrayan, and other ethnic groups, this policy is not viewed in isolation but through the lens of

interethnic relations, generational transmission of political narratives, and aspirations for national reconciliation.

This study contributes to the literature by filling a gap in qualitative research that specifically centers the voices of Ethiopian immigrants in Denver. It examines how ethnic federalism shapes their perceptions of unity, governance, and intergroup relations, offering a localized and experiential understanding of a broader national issue.

Theoretical Perspectives on Ethnicity in Ethiopia

Ethnicity, like many foundational concepts in the social sciences, lacks a singular, universally accepted definition. Derived from the Greek term *ethnos*, which historically referred to a race, tribe, or nation, the term has evolved to describe communities bound by shared cultural norms, language, values, and traditions. While earlier connotations emphasized biological or kinship-based affiliations, contemporary scholars distinguish ethnicity from race by grounding it in cultural and symbolic identity (Jenkins, 2008; Ostergård, 1992). Ethnicity is thus understood as a social construct that carries both emotional resonance and political significance, particularly in multicultural and postcolonial societies such as Ethiopia.

Phinney (1995) defined ethnicity as a combination of cultural values, traditions, and beliefs inherited from one's ancestry. Building on this understanding, Yakovlev (2010) and Tovkanets (2019) argued that ethnicity is inseparable from nation-building processes, noting that modern nations frequently emerged alongside, or in response to, ethnic identities. These scholars contend that ethnic identity shapes the development of political and economic institutions and is central to understanding how societies define

citizenship, governance, and belonging. Yakovlev further noted the historical linkage between the concepts of nation and ethnicity, underscoring how governance systems often reflect ethnic foundations.

To explain the complexity of ethnic identity, scholars have advanced four principal theoretical perspectives—each offering distinct interpretations of how ethnicity is formed, expressed, and politically utilized.

Primordialism views ethnicity as a fixed, inherited identity rooted in common ancestry, language, religion, and tradition. It posits that these deep-seated bonds foster emotional attachments that shape group behavior and social solidarity (Geertz, 1963; Smith, 1986).

Epiphenomenalism, influenced by Marxist theory, conceptualizes ethnicity as a secondary effect of material forces, particularly class conflict and economic inequality. Scholars like Bonacich (1972) and Hechter (1978) suggest that ethnic identity emerges in response to structural labor market divisions and functions as a veil for underlying economic interests.

Situationalism presents ethnicity as fluid and context-dependent, emphasizing the strategic use of identity in different social and political environments. According to Barth (1969) and Okamura (1981), individuals may emphasize or downplay their ethnic affiliations based on perceived social advantages or risks.

Subjectivism, or constructivism, understands ethnicity as an ongoing process of self-identification and external categorization. In this view, ethnic identity is shaped by narrative, memory, and interaction. Scholars such as Gans (1979) and Fearon and Laitin

(2000) argue that ethnic boundaries are not static but continuously negotiated and redefined.

These theoretical frameworks are particularly relevant for understanding Ethiopia's ethno-federalist structure and its influence on diaspora identity. They provide the conceptual foundation for this study's examination of how Ethiopian immigrants in Denver interpret their ethnic identity in light of Ethiopia's federal system. By situating diaspora perceptions within these theoretical lenses, the study offers deeper insights into how homeland politics continue to shape identity construction, intergroup relations, and civic engagement among Ethiopian immigrants abroad.

Ethnicity and Federalism

Ethnicity and federalism are central themes in political science, sociology, and anthropology, particularly in multi-ethnic states where governance structures must balance unity and diversity. This literature review examines theoretical perspectives on ethnicity—primordialism, epiphenomenalism, situationalism, and subjectivism—and explores how federalism has been employed as a mechanism for managing ethnic diversity, with a focus on Ethiopia's ethnic federalism model. As we delve into the realm of literature review, our initial focus is drawn to the notion that ethnicity plays a fundamental and primary role in the examination of society. This perspective, known as the primordialist approach, derives its principles from the oldest school of thought within sociology and anthropology. It seeks to delve into the concept of ethnicity, with notable scholars like Geertz (1963), Issacs (1975), Stack (1986), and others offering substantial support for this theoretical framework. Within this paradigm, ethnicity is portrayed as an

inherent, unchanging, and inborn attribute acquired from birth, often associated with the kinship and clan structures inherent in human society. In contrast, the other three approaches have emerged as contrasting viewpoints to the primordialist stance.

The ‘primordialists’ drew inspiration from Edward Shils’ research in 1957, emphasizing the significance of innate connections rooted in language, religion, race, ethnicity, and territory. They contend that nations and ethnic communities stand for the inherent building blocks of history and indispensable components of the human journey. What is even more significant is that Smith (1986) noted these ‘primordial ties’ have consistently acted as divisions within the human species, much like the inherent aspects of sex or geographical differences and will continue to do so.

The ‘primordialists’ draw inspiration from Edward Shils’ work in 1957, which underscores the significance of primordial connections rooted in language, religion, race, ethnicity, and territory. Their argument revolves around the assertion that nations and ethnic communities represent the inherent building blocks of historical development and essential facets of human existence. Moreover, as Smith (1986) discusses, the primordialist contend that ‘primordial ties’ have, and will continue to, inherently divide humanity much like sex or geographical distinctions.

When we think about the review of literature the first thing that came to mind is the primordial nature of it. The primordialist approach is the oldest in sociology and anthropology in addressing the phenomenon of ethnicity. This school of thought is supported by theories presented, such as Geertz (1963), Issacs (1975), Stack (1986), and others. This approach attempts to explain as ethnicity is something given, permanent,

fixed, and innate ascribed at birth. One can claim it as it is derived from the kin-and-clan structure of human society. The other three emerged as the antithesis to the primordialist approach following this approach.

The epiphenomenon approach came into existence as a counterargument against ethnicity's fixed and permanent nature. This approach refuses to accept ethnicity as a permanent, fixed, or inborn quality. For instance, Bonacich (1972) presented the notion of ethnicity away from inborn qualities in terms of the economic structure of society. Bonacich (1972) stated that any economic situation influences the way people perceive and conceive their ethnicity. The approach offers views that hold a dynamic nature of ethnicity. It believes ethnicity can be changed, constructed, or manipulated to gain specific political and economic ends.

In support of the epiphenomenon approach to ethnicity, Hechter (1978) developed a theory of ethnicity with viewpoints that insert the theory of internal colonialism and cultural division of labor. Both Bonacich (1972) and Hechter (1978) forwarded an approach that divides society's economic structure into two sectors, center, and periphery. The periphery consists of marginal jobs where products are not unimportant to society, for example, agricultural work, but which offer little in the form of compensation as compared to the jobs in the center.

In this peripheral labor sector, immigrants concentrate, develop their own solidarity, and maintain their culture. Thus, ethnicity is a phenomenon that can be created and maintained by society's economic conditions. Following the same line of arguments, Nagel and Olzak (1982) propounded that ethnicity is not a God-given mark but rather the

result of a reflection of society's cultural and economic conditions. It is a byproduct of an uneven economy or a product of economic exploitation.

The approach holds and reflects that a group can maintain its identity when interacting with others in an economically stratified society. Making criteria for determining membership and ways of signaling membership and exclusion is based upon the person's economic conditions. Ethnic groups are expressed based on the occupation of exclusive territories.

This position appeared to be highly influenced by the philosophical part of materialism, rooted in the Marxist theories of economic injustices in society. It espouses that ethnicity assumes that all culture was epiphenomenal to class in the community. People's social engagement is closely linked to their material activity and relations. No innate disposition justifies representations in an ethnic group. Any act of representation and relations is the reflection of materialistic relations. Thus, the spiritual relationship, including the ethnic affinity to each other, is related to their class relationship, which manifests the materialistic relationship. In explaining the epiphenomenon approach, Okolovski & Tishkov (1996) explained that ethnicity is created in the dynamics of elite competition within the boundaries determined by political and economic realities. The positions further espoused that ethnic groups are to be seen as a product of political myths created and manipulated by cultural elites in their pursuits of advantages of power.

Overall, the epiphenomenon approach seems reductionist by devaluing human conditions to materialistic engagements only. The suggestion that all human activity: political, intellectual, or spiritual, is determined by a definite development of their powers

of production is missing the point. In every situation, accepting material existence is the only determining factor in the conscious choice of ethnicity has profound paradoxes. But the solidarity that comes with the same economic conditions in society has united many in their identification with ethnicity. At its peak in the past, this approach was popular to mobilize the disfranchised in the community to ascribe an ethnic identity based upon the class structures.

This approach received heavy empirical criticism from a wide range of scholars. Most of the arguments forwarded suggested that the system of stratification does not entail the existence of ethnic groups. Leach (1967) presented a rather convincing argument that social classes are not a single phase. He stated that there are different subcultures within society, more than the basic characteristic of hierarchical ordering. Nielson (1980) argued that the assumption that ethnic groups are artificially constructed would have its shortcomings, for it implies that just as they can be created, they can also be destroyed, fragmented, and deconstructed. Furthermore, stratification allows a possibility of mobility based on evaluation by the scales that define the hierarchy. Thus, as evidenced by the study of Knutsson's analysis of the Oromo ethnic group in the context of Ethiopian society disproved it. A social system where whole ethnic groups are stratified with respect to their positions of privilege and disability within the state. But the economic or any status attainment does not make an ethnic Amhara of an ethnic Oromo. It did not show a change of ethnicities owing to a change of position in society.

After their in-depth analysis of this approach, many ethnicity studies indicated that the ethnic enclave economy has been discomforting and lacks conclusive evidence to

tie ethnicity to society's economic ills. An alternative mode of approach is needed. In finding an alternate method, these critics and others coined the situational approach. Dichotomizing ethnographic material in terms of material versus ideal or empirical versus conceptual is inadequate. In finding an alternate method, these critics and others coined the situational approach.

The situational approach views ethnicity as an identity that is particular to a social context. The cornerstone of this approach is the rational choice theory. It makes ethnicity relative to the situations in that one can find himself. As individuals are endowed with their free will, they may choose to be included or excluded from an ethnic group in society. Ethnicity is not coercive. The seminal works of Banton (1983), Daniel Bell (1975) Jeffery Ross (1982) are a good illustration of this position. Ethnicity is not imposed but instead chosen. Ross (1982) stated that ethnicity is a group option in which resources are mobilized to induce political pressure on the system to create a fair distribution of public goods. Okamura (1981) posits the situational approach rests upon the individual ascription to ethnic identity mainly to organize the meaning of his social relationships within the requirements of variously structured social situations.

Critiques of this approach indicated that situational theories attach an essential function that an ethnic and ethnic group can serve rather than the phenomenon. The teleology of ethnic identity is not equivalent to the phenomenon of ethnicity. One can cite examples of adherence to ethnicity that cannot be explained by instrumental reasons alone. One's choice of ethnicity is more complicated than the beneficial interest in society. It encompasses feelings and complex conceptions of identity. The subjective

import of ethnic group membership does not lie just merely in one's pursuit of practical interest but also, and perhaps foremost, in one's feelings and a complex conception of identity.

The subjective approach sees ethnicity as basically a social-psychological reality or a matter of perception of "us" and "them" in opposition to looking at it as something that objectively exists as given. Ethnicity is a constructed category that can be shaped and modified throughout history with the prevailing realities in our society. Thus, all subjective approach thinkers do not intend to reject all objective aspects of ethnicity, but they all tend to make it secondary to reality's perceptive experiences.

In the past twenty years, the subjectivist approach to studying ethnicity has been robust and exemplified by Fredrik Barth's (1969) and H. Gans's (1969) seminal works. It ranges from ethnic group boundaries to the postmodernist movement in contemporary thought of constructivism and the empirical studies of ethnic generations in many institutions. Barth (1969) exhibited an extremely subjective position and stated that ethics boundaries are purely psychological, and their content is irrelevant to ethnicity. In his approach, ethnic groups are nothing but the results of group relations in which boundaries are established through mutual perceptions outside of a preexisting culture. Another subjectivist, H. Gans (1979), stated that ethnicity has no practical value except symbolism. With the prevalence of assimilation, immigration, and acculturation, ethnicity is fluid and not culturally bound. All in all, the subjectivist literature sees ethnicity as created and recreated through individuals' everyday actions, perceiving themselves as

associated with a particular ethnic identity to act to conform, contest, or propagate that identity (Fearon & Laitin, 2000).

Overall, the primordialist approach emphasized the static natural dimension of ethnicity and led us to deduce ethnic identities to constitute a direct source of mutual fear, mistrust, ancient antipathies, and conflicts between ethnic groups (Vanhanen, 1999; Esteban, Mayoral, and Ray, 2012). Conversely, ethnic identity becomes relevant to conflict outbreaks only when manipulated for instrumentalist political gains. The politicization of ethnic identity perpetuates grievances/frustration, which induces ethnic conflict (Ellingsen, 2000). But as clarified in this section, grievances arising from the instrumentalization of ethnic identities contribute towards crystallizing primordial ethnic divisions when the grievances are aired and disseminated through informal and formal interactions, including media broadcasts. A shared sentiment of frustration against a perceived threatening out-group fosters cohesion "within the in-group" while setting divisions and enhancing hatred, fear, mistrust, and the danger of violent conflict between the groups. Based on the earlier examination, certain social scientists express doubt regarding the presumed inherent nature of ethnic identity and its purported deep historical origins. This skepticism is rooted in the noticeable flexibility of ethnic identity, which is subject to dynamic changes and manipulations, influenced by politics, interpretations, and the adaptability of its cultural elements and essential symbols.

Federalism as a Tool for Managing Ethnic Diversity

This section examines the concept of federalism as a governance model for multi-ethnic societies, with Ethiopia serving as a key case study. It explores the theoretical

rationale for ethnic federalism, its empirical application, and the resulting political, social, and institutional consequences. In the explanation mentioned earlier, we also encounter the concept of federalism, often defined as a theory aimed at reconciling political autonomy with a unifying appeal. This is particularly relevant in multi-ethnic states dealing with diversity management challenges. From an empirical standpoint, numerous countries have experimented with and continue to explore federalism and various forms of territorial autonomy as a strategic approach to addressing issues related to ethno-linguistic groups and alleviating inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts. Many scholars advocate federalism as an alternative approach for nations marked by multi-ethnic complexities, seeing it as a potential solution to conflicts and tensions. In studies focused on federalism, the system is often regarded as a viable governance model for nations deeply divided along ethnic, racial, and religious lines.

In the realm of ethnicity and federalism within Ethiopian politics, scholars have examined the intersection of these two concepts, revealing divergent perspectives on the effectiveness of implementing an ethnic-based federal system to govern ethnic diversity and address conflicts. Some assert that an ethnic federal system enhances the democratic management of ethnic diversity and conflict resolution. Conversely, others argue that ethnic federalism amplifies levels of ethnic tension and conflict, rather than fostering peaceful inter-ethnic relations in deeply divided societies.

Kymlicka (2005) argues that Federalism should be less flexible regarding the distribution of powers and demarcating boundaries. According to Kymlicka analysis, it is difficult to resolve the disputes about the division of powers raised by the ‘regional-based

units' and 'nationality-based units' in multinational Federalism in practical instances. For Kymlicka, there are two units; these are 'nationality-based units' and 'regional-based units', and their demand is different. The regional-based units in a federation desire to divide powers based on the conception that all constituent units are equal. Hence, it is not essential to grant 'special status' to one unit. By contrast, nationality-based teams seek to acquire a special status in the larger unit. Thus, for Kymlicka, this problem of multinational Federalism can be resolved by reasonable people of goodwill (Kymlicka, 2005). According to Odion (2011), Federalism can be understood as a governmental and institutional structure designed by the stakeholders to maintain unity while preserving diversity through a shared rule.

Federalism may be defined as a political concept that refers to an administrative system constituted of different units. There is a constitutional and free contract between other teams in a federal administration system and a separation of powers between the center and the peripheries. A federation between different units can only exist when mutual commitments and agreements exist between the center and the boundaries. Federation between different units may have two forms. The first form is called the 'holding-together' federation, and the second one is called the 'coming-together' federation. In the holding-together federation, the units may have different linguistic, ethnic, or cultural groups, and so to live together and form a large state, they enter a federation.

Federation in countries like Ethiopia, India, and Spain is an excellent example of a holding-together form of federation. On the other hand, the coming-together federation

is established between independent states. The independent states come together to form a large state; they enter a federation for economic or security purposes. The Federation of the USA is an excellent example of this kind of federation. Regarding the Ethiopian form of federation, some argue that it is a holding-together only on paper, but practically it is a coming-together form of federation. I think, as others also claimed, it is not. Because historically, the ethnic groups of Ethiopia did not live in separate, independent states. Instead, they lived in different cultures under the rule of many small monarchical administration systems. It is impossible to claim they formed the current Ethiopian State by a coming-together form of federation. Instead, it is possible to claim that the Ethiopian partnership is established through a holding-together form of federation.

Federation has many advantages. One of the benefits of a federation is its capacity to accommodate diversity. Many scholars agree that Federalism advocates the existence of different groups, and it also supports group pluralism. But scholars like Schuck (2006) warn that it reinforces existing social cleavages if the federal system focuses on accommodating differences (Schuck 2006 cited in Semahagn, 2014:16). According to Schuck, if the federal system of a given state focuses on accommodating different groups' grievances, it poses a risk of disintegration among different groups. Trudeau (2005) also raises the danger or disadvantage of Federalism in building a single state within a multinational state. He stated that "...the advantage, as well as the peril of federalism, is that it permits the development of a regional consensus based on regional values; so, federalism is, ultimately, bound to fail if the nationalism it cultivates is unable

to generate a national image which has immensely more appeal than the regional ones" (Trudeau, 2005, p. 222).

Scholars agree that a successful federation emerges out of political bargaining and consensus; all constituent units should be involved in political bargaining and forge a successful federation. As Wheare (1973) notes, a single independent federal state can establish itself if the political actors agree to entrust autonomous regional governments with certain exclusive matters (Wheare 1973 cited in Semahagn, 2014:17). In the same way, Elazar notes that for forging a successful federation, constituent units in a federation must be equal in terms of population and wealth (Elazar 1982 cited in Semahagn, 2014:18).

Despite the commonly known inclinations as Agbu (2004) noted of African leaders' unitary government, the 1991 transition by the TPLF group to Federalism was astonishing. After going through the colonial experience of divide and rule, many African nations tend to distaste Federalism based on ethnicity. Jinadu (2002) states that African leaders are often inclined to form a unitary government structure rather than Federalism. Agbu (2004) agreed that African nationalist groups stand on the opposite side of introducing Federalism by the British as the culprits for dividing and ruling in the colonized African states. For instance, one of the renowned Ghana leader Kwame Nkrumah refused to institute Federalism after the end of colonialism. Thus, the introduction of ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia after the demise of the unitary military government of Ethiopia was significant. However, here mention must be made that Federalism was familiar to Ethiopians before the TPLF reign. Meredith (2011) wrote the

spotlight on the federalism experiment in Ethiopia came in the 1950s. After the end of Eritrean colonization, the United Nations acknowledged the federal integration of Eritrea with Ethiopia under Emperor Haile Selassie's administration.

Disregarding or discounting the imperial regime's attempt at Federalism, Turton (2006) reflected that, though not strangely that the introduction of Ethnic Federalism by TPLF is radical and pioneering. The primary justification for TPLF institutionalizing ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia was the sentiment of ethnonationalism (Assefa, 2007). Thus, the 1991 Transitional Government of Ethiopia declared ethnic Federalism for Ethiopian problems and constitutionally adopted its ethnic name to the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. This new administration attempted to reconstruct a post-imperial state with an ethnic federal system.

The desired goal was to decentralize and share power with regions and local units. In 1992, it divided the nation into 12 parts instead of the 14 areas before its ascent to power. Two years later decreased into ten regions based on what the ruling party thinks is an essential ethnic identity that deserves administrative geographical territory and two federal cities. The Two urban national units, namely Addis Ababa and DireDawa, were too diverse and could not be relegated to one ethnic group. Once Ethiopia adopted a federal form of government through the 1995 constitution, it created two layers of government: the Federal government and nine regional states (FDRE Constitution (1995), Art. 50(1).

The new leaders named their party EPRDF and vowed to follow Marxist ideology. Once in power, the end of the Cold War compelled this group to revise their

ideological views and adopt liberal values. However, many of their actions show that the ruling party struggled to free itself from its old Marxist ideology. Bizuayehu Daba & Fesseha Mulu (2017) indicated that terms like ‘revolutionary democracy,’ ‘self-determination rights of nations and nationalities,’ and later the ideology of ‘developmental state’ as a principle of a democratic system, reveal the lingering influence and an attempt to reinvent their ideology.

By adopting these features of socialist federations, Ethiopia’s federal system constitutionally granted the state’s sovereignty to Ethiopia’s nations, nationalities, and peoples. It also gives the states (regions) the right to self-determination, including secession. Article 39(1) of the FDRE constitution claims, “Every Nation, Nationality, and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession.” In principle, the Ethiopian federal system grants regional units the right to self-determination, including secession, and these rights are constitutionally guaranteed. However, pragmatically, like the former socialist federation, a single vanguard party controls the Ethiopian federal system (EPRDF). This party is known for reinventing terms that captivate regional leaders and regional units through democratic centralism. It uses regional units as an extension of its policy and strategy.

For instance, after Eritrea declared its independence Ethiopia as an independent state had nine local regions and two urban federal units until the transfer of power from EPDRF to the Prosperity party in 2018. The change in 2018 brought more quests for independent federal states, and the ruling party granted two more regional states to be

part of the federation. Currently, Ethiopia has 11 ethnically federated regional states and two chartered cities, Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa.

From the outset, the Ethiopian ethnic federal system came into existence on the Marxist-Leninist notion of 'the rights of self-determination of nationalities up to secession (Bayu, 2022). Bewuketu et al. (2019) stated that the Ethiopian ethnic federal system resembles the former socialist federations in rhetoric and practice. Like the former socialist federations, the Ethiopian ethnic federal system is controlled by the 'vanguard' party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). It has affected and hampered the country's democratization and multiethnic federation process. It is undeniable that Ethiopia's ethnic federal system introduced group rights to foster the language, cultures, and traditions of different ethnic groups (Amsalu, D.2020).

Upon instituting ethnic Federalism, Ethiopia had predominantly two central intellectual outlooks concerning ethnicity. The first perspective argued that Ethiopian society had reached a stage of common identity by nurturing common Ethiopian citizenship to obliterate primordial attachments and loyalties to kinship. Ethiopic culture and mindset have blown and blossomed into a civic mentality that has long become a cult than ethnic affinity. Merit has long been the measure in becoming a full-fledged citizen than ascription; maintaining ethnicity is, therefore, degeneration rather than regeneration.

On the other hand, the second perspective argued that Ethiopia is a home for various ethnic groups with their geographic concentration and that they need to get some form of political representation and self-government to maintain their particular need and

preference, and at the same time to maintain their color. Thus, two polarizing viewpoints were the starting point for the controversial ethnicity policy.

The problem of instituting ethnicity into administration at the beginning, as stated by Kidane (1997), in Ethiopia, where several ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups live in one state mixed, has been arduous. Given that many of the regions are not ethnically homogenous. However, the established Constitution deliberately allowed regions to be named after the region's majority and dominant ethnic group. Thus, the new arrangement seems to create the problem of bypassing minority ethnic groups in an ethnically organized region. Thus, Taye (2017) stated that democracy is flawed without the special protection of minorities. The prevalence of an ensuring participation mechanism of all minorities in governance guarantees this protection in an ethnically divided society where no ethnic enclaves are purely one ethnic group, as the Ethiopian case will create repressed and disadvantaged groups.

Soon after its implementation, Minasse (1996) argued that the new Ethiopian Constitution unimaginatively failed to resolve ethnic problems; in contrast, it exacerbated the existing seemingly ethnic problems and brought about zero-sum progress. Tesfaye (2013) collaborated with this viewpoint in his study and concluded that the long waited and espoused overcoming capabilities of ethnic conflict and contradiction amongst ethnic groups did not vanquish from the affairs of Ethiopian life after the implementation of ethnic Federalism.

In agreement, in his meta-analysis research, Taye (2017) examined the perceived ethnic conflict in Ethiopia after the adoption of ethnic Federalism was the potential cause

of it or not. As exploratory case study research, his study dealt with the positive and negative aspects of ethnic Federalism. A historical analysis is given in the study. For instance, throughout Ethiopia's history under King Menelik, Ethiopia's rule adopted some form of Federalism. The study revealed that the concept of decentralized government is more familiar than many argued for Ethiopians. Ethiopia's application of decentralization is not a problem by itself. The intensification of ethnic identity on national identity in the name of Federalism can be a source of conflict. Thus, the research acknowledged the many principles and ideas desirable of Federalism, but its danger outweighs the African context's benefits in general and in the Ethiopian case. Therefore, the research indicated that future inquiry is needed to alleviate intensified conflicts. It recommends establishing a non-ethnic, non-tribal multi-party democracy as one of them.

Analyzing ethnic federalism in the Ethiopian context, Lavers (2018) reflected on his essay on ethnic federalism, responding to the land rights of ethnic minorities under federalism. Based on his seminal study of land rights after the institutionalization of ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia was not controversial. Through his investigation, he revealed that the attachment of many Ethiopians' traditional tenure resulted in considerable difficulties in the ethnic federated states of Ethiopia. The land rights of ethnic minorities within the enclave of ethnic federalism are studied thoroughly in his inquiry, revealing the exasperating nature of ethnic conflicts.

The case study uses the land conflict in one part of Ethiopia to demonstrate the laws with three dimensions. Adopting ethnic federalism to govern Ethiopia's land rights created ambiguity and conflict among ethnic groups. With the adoption of ethnic

federalism, land tenure became the foster care of three institutions with unimaginable bureaucracies to present numerous ambiguities that led to conflicts amongst constituents. The study highlights that state ownership of land is unchanged, but the adopted ethnic federalism offers a role to the federal ethnic nation to deal with land tenure. Thirdly the customary tenure that was part of the history of society also exerts its influence. Thus, many conflicts observed in Ethiopia, explained in this article, are caused by the divergence, and overlap of the three institutions' laws and the justification used towards non-indigenous minorities.

Therefore, Lovers (2018), in his article in this regard, raises important questions regarding citizenship and belonging in the Ethiopian ethnic federalism context. Whether the individuals first and foremost national citizens or members of ethnic groups? The researcher is inclined to conclude that the causes of conflicts in Ethiopia are specifically on the links between land and federalism and have tended to focus on the challenge of demarcating borders between ethnic regions, leading to the territorial competition along ethnic lines. Thus, the study's conclusion highlighted that democratization in line with the attributes of federal institutional arrangement in the framework of ethnic complexity is daunting. Acknowledging the intricate relationship between ethnicity and Federalism, Gardner, J. A. (2018) reflected his study of The Theory and Practice of Contestatory Federalism is one of the studies to guide this study.

One of Gardner's (2018) works is about the concept of federalism, which attracts many to the study of federalism. The author affirmed that what Madison explained about federalism is reasonable to pay considerable attention to apply in any given society.

Gardner (2018) cautioned that federalism is not a God-given prescription that has to be faithfully exercised in every situation. Federalism, according to him earmarked as naturally unstable due to multiple reasons but essential to protecting the liberty of constituents in any given society. His study examined Madison's hypotheses of human weakness in abating federalism. According to the article, Ethiopia's adoption of federalism is not a problem by itself; instead, what the federalists' suggested lies in humankind's weakness in dealing with it. Using federalism strictly on ethnic and language lines would lead to people's noncompliance with the limitations of their societal position.

Dividing authorities can keep federalism from creating authoritarianism and the breakdown of nations. Federalism is the ideal form of governance when power is appropriately divided and remains one of the best alternatives. Gardner's article explored the history of federalism and suggested considerable risks in choosing federalism. Gardner. A (2018) cited, "twenty-seven of the forty-four federations formed in the last two hundred years... have failed either by breaking apart or collapsing into being a unitarist. Thus, the article elaborates that a federal theory concerns finding and keeping the division of power and autonomy as initially intended. The study acknowledged the growing interest in federalism emanating from the notion that control and independence are managed appropriately. Appropriately applying federalism to solve societal problems is crucial. Finding the balance and carefully shifting through the federation's basis before implementation. Thus, in ethnically divided countries like Ethiopia, the hope is for

political recognition of cultural and ethnic pluralism through federalism to alleviate the tensions of ethnic conflicts.

For instance, Ketemaw (2020), in studying the Ethiopian experiences of federalism in his study titled "Holding Together, Coming Together or Putting Together," stated that federations are naturally formed through coming together, holding together, or putting together processes. Both were held together and coming together federations can be established through democratic bargaining or coercively by the winners. Hence, this study aimed to situate Ethiopia into one of these three variants by critically examining the transitional activities. The qualitative methodology was used to analyze the data collected through interviews and document analysis. Accordingly, the paper argued that Ethiopia is a put-together federation because of the significant flaws during the transition. For instance, the investigation revealed that one of the major ethnic groups, the Amhara in Ethiopia, did not fully participate in the coming together paradigm. Hence, Ketemaw (2020) stated that the willful rejection of one of the major ethnic groups to the conference was its pitfall. Further, the absence of an organization that could represent Amhara during the Peace Conference and extrajudicial treatment against those explaining their discontent in the restructuring processes is one justification to level Ethiopia's federation as putting together.

Moreover, in his analysis Ketemaw (2020) unveiled the electoral fraud incident that forced the major political parties to boycott the 1992 and 1994 elections. The study indicated the fate of ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia is ominous. Homogeneity of the ethnic group in every ethnic enclave was not a reality. It is paradoxical since 80 ethnic groups

cannot be territorially represented in 10 ethnically federated regions. Furthermore, this study also suggested the prevalence of manipulation in drafting the policy of ethnic federalism. Thus, one of the conclusions reached by this inquiry was that manipulating the drafting and ratification processes of the Constitution by TPLF/EPRDF was the cause of conflict amongst ethnic groups. It concludes that restructuring or changing ethnic federation is crucial. It suggests building a coalition through democratic bargaining would have better results than the federation's putting nature that caused many Ethiopian conflicts. Therefore, the legitimacy crisis due to the different questions rooted in the formation processes begs for the resolution of looking for alternatives in the future.

The well-thought-out articles of Desta Abebe & Ephrem Ahadu (2020) titled "Nexus between Ethnic Federalism and Creating National Identity Vis-À-Vis Nation-Building in Contemporary Ethiopia" were also used in guiding this research. Their study uses government data to examine the relationship between ethnic federalism and the formation of national identity. Striking a balance between national identity and the ethnically federated region has been cited as the source of conflicts in many parts of Ethiopia.

After the qualitative inquiry, the researcher pointed out the Ethiopian Constitution, which tried to embody a balance between national identity and diversity to build one economic and political community by rectifying" past injustices" that led to many problems. It acknowledges the creation of the politicization of ethnicity under ethnic federalism. The politicization of race in Ethiopians has led to ethnic cleavages, distinctiveness, and differences. Thus, the aspired federation of ethnic groups became a

backlash against nation-building and shared aspirations. The study concluded that intensifying Ethnic federalism as the policy to administer many ethnic groups with no enclaved territory is problematic. Thus, the country will be in cartesian ethnic tensions and conflict, eventually forcing the government to disintegrate. Therefore, the ethnic federal arrangement in Ethiopia needs an urgent reconsideration before the case moves to the worst scenario.

Following the implementation of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, Bewuketu D. & et al. (2019), in their study "The Pitfalls of Ethnolinguistic-Based Federal Experiment in Ethiopia," presented scholars' opinions about adopting the new federal system or ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia varied tremendously regarding its normative and practical significance for the state. The research described that if it is implemented according to its initial ideas, ethnic federalism benefits outweigh its risks. In exploring the Ethiopian experiment, the qualitative study found the distortion of the promise that ethnic federalism might bring about in multiethnic Ethiopia. The study revealed that most care was not given to implementing ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia. Political manipulation was rampant by political entrepreneurs. In analyzing the data, their study revealed that political elites had used multiple Ethiopian ethnicities for selfish gains. As many writers cited in this research, argue, contemporary Ethiopian politics lacks genuine decentralization of power and experiences. It continued the concentration of control by TPLF through its ethnic-based satellite parties. As noted in this article, regrettably, Ethiopia must take advantage of a golden opportunity to realize a workable state-building

strategy. Thus, a perspective on overcoming Ethiopia's political dilemma in dealing with ethnic federalism vis-a-vis Ethiopian identity is needed.

Recognizing the dividing effect of ethnic Federalism, Midega M. (2017) studied the city of Dire Dawa as an example of "Ethiopian Federalism and the Ethnic Politics of Divided Cities." His study initially tackled the conceptual challenge of ethnic federalism at a more theoretical level, evidencing one of the federated regions, Dire Dawa, with national authoritarian politics. The second part of the study provided a political and historical background to the genesis of multiethnic cities in Ethiopia b

According to this study, an in-depth analysis of the application of ethnic federalism has played out in DireDawa to debunk the glorification of ethnic federalism as the bearer of harmony in society. His study exposes segmental autonomy and proportionality that affect the distribution of bureaucratic posts, the city council elections, education, and media amongst minority ethnic members. After discussing the shortcomings of ethnic federalism in a multiethnic city like DireDawa, the study concludes with an overview of the lessons and insights. DireDawa cases present a scholarly interest in Ethiopia's ethnic federalism has often been on constitutional design.

The multiethnic cities of Ethiopia deserve more scholarly focus indeed. Cities are the locus where the challenges of living together first emerge because it is at the local urban level that the notion of access, rights, and participation takes on an immediate and everyday meaning. Thus, the study concluded that the observed segmental autonomy, proportionality, and a grand coalition in DireDawa seem to flourish outside the formal constitutional framework of ethnic federalism. The arrangement appears to dilute the

more combative elements of ethnic nationalism for political stability. Overall, relative political stability has come at the expense of grassroots democracy, which begs for better political arrangements.

Asnake (2020) also points out Ethiopian federal system has its salient features. Ethiopian federalism's first and apparent feature is ethnicity as the first principle of organizing the state. Ethiopian citizens are categorized into different ethnolinguistic groupings. Ethnicity has been the driving force behind many of the demands for a measure of self-rule in a well-defined territorial level of local government. Thus, mixing the complex concept of ethnicity with the notion of federalism was nothing other than complicating the complex.

A similar study in a small town using a minority ethnic group by Mesfin (2017) titled Ethiopian Ethnic Federalism: Without a Space for 'Indigenous Peoples' revealed the prevalence of existential insecurity. The articles bring one of the minority ethnic groups to the front. The study showed data that indicates the Majang ethnic group under ethnic federalism faced isolation, culminating with existential insecurity. In its introduction, the Ethiopian Constitution obligates the Federal Government to promote and support the self-rule of the 'nations, nationalities, and peoples at all levels and to respect their identity. According to the study, this promotion and protection of minority rights and the party's pledge to empower ethnic minorities were naturally welcomed with enthusiasm by the Majang, as was the case with virtually all the country's nations, nationalities, and peoples.

The Majang has been unable to protect its land and forest resources from dual encroachment. Self-directed highlander migrants started to flock to the Majang land on the one hand. The state-licensed domestic and foreign investors entered Majang land without the proper consultation and consent of the people. The espoused territorial autonomy under Ethnic nationality zones becomes meaningless. The federal government's arrangements with large-scale agricultural projects and uncontrolled migration have undermined any sense of genuine ethnic independence. The Majang ethnic collective identity wedded to a particular landscape, climate ecology, and resource base is threatened by state-sanctioned agricultural policy and internal migration.

The case affirms institutional/constitutional engineering and the constitutional guarantee on ethnic federalism are paradoxical. Thus, ethnic federalism application to minority ethnic groups in the more significant landscapes of Ethiopia is incapable of delivering the intended results. Therefore, the study using the experiences of the Majang indicates why dozens of other indigenous communities cannot take advantage of the institutional possibilities that ethnofederalism makes available to the 'nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia. Considering cultural values in the arrangements is valuable.

Reichert, E. (2006) on "Human Rights: An Examination of Universalism and Cultural Relativism" offered a dimension to the confounding issues of ethnic federalism. His study explained that universalism and cultural relativism in society have significant influences. As a core concept in the globalized world, the author alluded that universalism came into existence with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights. Countries worldwide discussed and negotiated values that would become the basis for human rights. “Human rights belong to everyone, no matter what” status they hold in society. Adopting universalism should not be the antithesis of cultural relativism.

In some cases, these two notions are a detour between nations that strongly believe in a system that practically celebrates diversity based on equality. Those who firmly advocate cultural relativity that countries uniquely hold unto them give them an identity separate from one another. Each culture has its unique valuation of moral and acceptable behavior relationships within the global context. Still, it does not mean the relativity of some values leads to the rejection of fundamental universal human rights issues.

The study under review argued that cultural relativism is essential in analyzing how we interpret human rights. Cultural relativism does serve as a check on an unobstructed view of human rights. Cultural relativism does require consideration of culture in how human rights are applied to daily life. However, we should view cultural relativism critically to avoid establishing an illegitimate priority over established human rights principles. On the other hand, the domination of one nation’s culture in the name of universalism was also redressed. This theory of cultural relativism also curves the issue in the Ethiopian context related to domination by some ethnic elite groups and oppression of minorities. This explains the lack of equality and democracy that prevailed in Ethiopia for decades. Many ethnic groups espoused in Ethiopia the explicit and implicit experience of Prejudice, stereotyping, marginalization/exclusion, and discrimination in the name of the

universal Ethiopian identity. As with any normal cognitive process, putting people into groups and categories is highly prevalent globally, including in Ethiopia. Considering the article, it is crucial to assess Ethiopian cultural values in redressing the issues of ethnic federalism.

Following the implementation of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, Bewuketu D. & et al. (2019), in their study "The Pitfalls of Ethnolinguistic-Based Federal Experiment in Ethiopia," presented scholars' opinions about adopting the new federal system or ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia varied tremendously regarding its normative and practical significance for the state. The research described that if it is implemented according to its initial ideas, ethnic federalism benefits outweigh its risks. In exploring the Ethiopian experiment, the qualitative study found the distortion of the promise that ethnic federalism might bring about in multiethnic Ethiopia. The study revealed that most care was not given to implementing ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia. Political manipulation was rampant by political entrepreneurs. In analyzing the data, their study revealed that political elites had used multiple Ethiopian ethnicities for selfish gains. As many writers cited in this research, argue, contemporary Ethiopian politics lacks genuine decentralization of power and experiences. It continued the concentration of control by TPLF through its ethnic-based satellite parties. As noted in this article, regrettably, Ethiopia must take advantage of a golden opportunity to realize a workable state-building strategy. Thus, a perspective on overcoming Ethiopia's political dilemma in dealing with ethnic federalism vis-a-vis Ethiopian identity is needed.

Recognizing the dividing effect of ethnic Federalism, Midega M. (2017) studied the city of Dire Dawa as an example of "Ethiopian Federalism and the Ethnic Politics of Divided Cities." His study initially tackled the conceptual challenge of ethnic federalism at a more theoretical level, evidencing one of the federated regions, DireDawa, with national authoritarian politics. The second part of the study provided a political and historical background to the genesis of multiethnic cities in Ethiopia b

According to this study, an in-depth analysis of the application of ethnic federalism has played out in DireDawa to debunk the glorification of ethnic federalism as the bearer of harmony in society. His study exposes segmental autonomy and proportionality that affect the distribution of bureaucratic posts, the city council elections, education, and media amongst minority ethnic members. After telling the shortcomings of ethnic federalism in a multiethnic city like DireDawa, the study concludes with an overview of the lessons and insights. DireDawa cases present scholarly interest in Ethiopia's ethnic federalism has often been on constitutional design.

The multiethnic cities of Ethiopia deserve more scholarly focus indeed. Cities are the locus where the challenges of living together first emerge because it is at the local urban level that the notion of access, rights, and participation takes on an immediate and everyday meaning. Thus, the study concluded that the observed segmental autonomy, proportionality, and a grand coalition in DireDawa seem to flourish outside the formal constitutional framework of ethnic federalism. The arrangement appears to dilute the more combative elements of ethnic nationalism for political stability. Overall, the relative

political stability has come at the expense of grassroots democracy, which begs for better political arrangements.

Asnake (2020) also points out Ethiopian federal system has its salient features. Ethiopian federalism's first and apparent feature is ethnicity as the first principle of organizing the state. Ethiopian citizens are categorized into different ethnolinguistic groupings. Ethnicity has been the driving force behind many of the demands for a measure of self-rule in a well-defined territorial level of local government. Thus, mixing the complex concept of ethnicity with the notion of federalism was nothing other than complicating the complex.

A similar study in a small town using a minority ethnic group by Mesfin (2017) titled Ethiopian Ethnic Federalism: Without a Space for 'Indigenous Peoples' revealed the prevalence of existential insecurity. The articles bring one of the minority ethnic groups to the front. The study showed data that indicates the Majang ethnic group under ethnic federalism faced isolation, culminating with existential insecurity. In its introduction, the Ethiopian Constitution obligates the Federal Government to promote and support the self-rule of the 'nations, nationalities, and peoples at all levels and to respect their identity. According to the study, this promotion and protection of minority rights and the party's pledge to empower ethnic minorities were naturally welcomed with enthusiasm by the Majang, as was the case with virtually all of the country's nations, nationalities, and peoples. Confidence diminishes in the castle of the Majang very soon.

The Majang has been unable to protect its land and forest resources from the dual encroachment. Self-directed highlander migrants started to flock to the Majang land on

the one hand. The state-licensed domestic and foreign investors entered Majang land without the proper consultation and consent of the people. The espoused territorial autonomy under Ethnic nationality zones becomes meaningless. The federal government's arrangements with large-scale agricultural projects and uncontrolled migration have undermined any sense of genuine ethnic independence. The Majang ethnic collective identity wedded to a particular landscape, climate ecology, and resource base is threatened by state-sanctioned agricultural policy and internal migration.

The case affirms institutional/constitutional engineering and the constitutional guarantee on ethnic federalism are paradoxical. Thus, ethnic federalism application to minority ethnic groups in the more significant landscapes of Ethiopia is incapable of delivering the intended results. Therefore, the study using the experiences of the Majang indicates why dozens of other indigenous communities cannot take advantage of the institutional possibilities that ethno-federalism makes available to the 'nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia.

Considering cultural values in the arrangements is valuable. Reichert, E. (2006) on "Human Rights: An Examination of Universalism and Cultural Relativism" offered a dimension to the confounding issues of ethnic federalism. His study explained that universalism and cultural relativism in society have significant influences. As a core concept in the globalized world, the author alluded that universalism came into existence with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Countries worldwide discussed and negotiated values that would become the basis for human rights. "Human

rights belong to everyone, no matter what status they hold in society. Adopting universalism should not be the antithesis of cultural relativism.

In some cases, these two notions are a detour between nations that strongly believe in a system that practically celebrates diversity based on equality. Those who firmly advocate cultural relativity that countries uniquely hold unto them give them an identity separate from one another. Each culture has its unique valuation of moral and acceptable behavior relationships within the global context. Still, it does not mean the relativity of some values leads to the rejection of fundamental universal human rights issues.

The study under review argued that cultural relativism is essential in analyzing how we interpret human rights. Cultural relativism does serve as a check on an unobstructed view of human rights. Cultural relativism requires consideration of culture in terms of how human rights are applied to daily life. However, we should view cultural relativism critically to avoid establishing an illegitimate priority over established human rights principles. On the other hand, the domination of one nation's culture in the name of universalism was also redressed. This theory of cultural relativism also curves the issue in the Ethiopian context related to domination by some ethnic elite groups and oppression of minorities. This explains the lack of equality and democracy that prevailed in Ethiopia for decades. Many ethnic groups espoused in Ethiopia the explicit and implicit experience of Prejudice, stereotyping, marginalization/exclusion, and discrimination in the name of the universal Ethiopian identity. As with any normal cognitive process, putting people into groups and categories is highly prevalent globally, including in Ethiopia. In light of the

article, it is crucial to assess Ethiopian cultural values in redressing the issues of ethnic federalism.

The examination of Ethiopian ethnic federalism cases in the literature review reveals a nuanced perspective on the potential impact of an ethnic federal system on democratic governance in the context of diverse societies. Numerous scholarly works assert that such a system could effectively manage ethnic diversity and contribute to conflict resolution within a democratic framework. However, counterarguments strongly argue that ethnic federalism might exacerbate ethnic tensions and conflicts rather than foster harmonious inter-ethnic relations, particularly in deeply divided societies.

In the ongoing theoretical debates surrounding the viability of an ethnic federal system, it becomes crucial to underscore the necessity of a contextually sensitive approach when analyzing discussions and applications of ethnic federalism. The Ethiopian federal experiences, given their distinct characteristics, offer a pertinent case study for further exploration.

Within this context, the observation made by Riker regarding the delicate link between federalism and freedom holds significance. Riker, in 1964, notably labeled the connection between federalism and the assurance of freedom as an “ideological fallacy.” His argument posits that the framers of federal constitutions prioritized practical considerations related to government expansion over an ideological commitment to safeguarding individual freedoms. This oversight is discernible in the Ethiopian context, where attempts to intertwine group identity as a measure of freedom and federalism may reflect a potential flaw in the conceptual framework. These theoretical concerns take on

practical urgency when examined through Ethiopia's experience with ethnic federalism, where the pursuit of cultural autonomy has produced complex political, social, and human rights implications. The following section explores these dynamics under the theme.

Ethnic Federalism and Cultural Autonomy in Ethiopia

The intersection of ethnic identity, federalism, and human rights presents a complex challenge in multicultural states. Ethiopia's adoption of ethnic federalism in 1995, enshrined in its constitution, aimed to empower historically marginalized ethnic groups by granting them territorial autonomy and, notably, the right to self-determination, including secession (FDRE Constitution, 1995, Art. 39). While theoretically grounded in the recognition of cultural diversity and group rights, the Ethiopian experience has exposed the limitations and contradictions inherent in institutionalizing ethnicity as the primary framework for governance.

Reichert (2006) provides a valuable lens for examining these contradictions through his analysis of the tension between universalism and cultural relativism in human rights discourse. Universalism, as reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, asserts that certain rights are inherent to all individuals regardless of cultural or political contexts. In contrast, cultural relativism emphasizes the importance of interpreting human rights through the values and norms of specific cultural communities. Reichert argues that these perspectives are not necessarily in conflict; rather, cultural relativism can function as a critical check on the ethnocentric application of universal

principles. At the same time, relativism must be approached cautiously to avoid legitimizing practices that undermine individual dignity and equality.

In Ethiopia, this balance has proven elusive. While the ethnic federal system was introduced to address historical injustices and promote cultural self-rule, it has often functioned as a tool for ethnic elites to entrench power. Scholars such as Fessha and Vaughn (2020) and Asnake (2013) have noted that ethnic federalism, rather than fostering equitable participation, has contributed to authoritarian governance, interethnic tension, and political fragmentation. This aligns with Reichert's caution that cultural autonomy, when unchecked by a robust rights framework, may perpetuate inequality under the guise of respecting diversity.

Empirical studies reinforce this concern. Bewuketu et al. (2019) examined the implementation of ethnic federalism and found that political elites have instrumentalized ethnicity to secure power, undermining democratic decentralization. Similarly, Midega (2017) explored the case of Dire Dawa. In this multiethnic city, federal arrangements designed to ensure proportional representation instead contributed to exclusion and elite bargaining, with little regard for grassroots democratic participation. These outcomes underscore the risk of ethnic federalism institutionalizing segmentalism without adequate mechanisms to protect individual and minority rights.

Further highlighting this disconnect, Mesfin (2017) documented the plight of the Majang ethnic group, a minority whose constitutional right to self-governance has been undermined by state-sanctioned land encroachments and the influx of external actors. Despite the formal autonomy granted under the federal system, the Majang have

experienced environmental degradation, political marginalization, and the erosion of cultural identity. Their case exemplifies the limits of legal provisions when cultural rights are not anchored in enforceable human rights protections.

These dynamics are consistent with Riker's (1964) argument that the assumed connection between federalism and liberty is often more ideological than empirical. He argued that federal structures are frequently motivated by pragmatic considerations of power-sharing rather than genuine commitments to freedom or democratic inclusion. Ethiopia's experience confirms this critique, as its ethnic federal system, framed in the language of self-determination and cultural rights, has often resulted in re-centralized power and restricted political space.

Given these findings, scholars have a growing consensus that Ethiopia's ethnic federalism requires fundamental reassessment. Fessha (2022) and Abbink (2021) argue that while recognizing ethnic identities is essential, governing structures must also be inclusive, flexible, and anchored in civic equality to prevent fragmentation and conflict. Integrating universal human rights standards with cultural sensitivity is compatible with federalism and essential to its democratic legitimacy.

Ultimately, Reichert's framework offers a critical corrective to purely ethnic approaches to governance. In the Ethiopian context, the pursuit of cultural autonomy must be reconciled with the imperative to protect individual rights, foster national cohesion, and ensure democratic accountability. Without such a balance, ethnic federalism risks reproducing the injustices it was designed to overcome.

These internal dynamics also shape how Ethiopian identity is negotiated beyond national borders. As debates over ethnicity, autonomy, and belonging continue within Ethiopia, they resonate deeply among diaspora communities navigating transnational spaces. The following section examines how these issues manifest in the diaspora, focusing on the formation of identity, cultural attachment, and political engagement under the theme: diaspora identity and transnationalism

Diaspora Identity and Transnationalism

Diaspora communities have long played a pivotal role in shaping political developments in their countries of origin, often acting as influential stakeholders in national discourse from abroad. The Ethiopian diaspora, mainly concentrated in U.S. cities such as Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Dallas, Seattle, Minneapolis, and Denver, exemplifies this pattern. With the expansion of global migration in the 21st century, diaspora identity and transnational political engagement have gained prominence in debates on nationalism, state formation, and conflict mediation (Brubaker, 2005; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

Among Ethiopian immigrants, diaspora identity is both dynamic and deeply politicized. Identity construction within the diaspora reflects multiple intersecting affiliations shaped by ethnic origin, generational status, host-country integration, and ongoing homeland developments (Sheffer, 2021). While some diaspora actors promote pan-Ethiopian civic nationalism, others align with ethnonationalist movements, such as those associated with the Oromo, Tigrayan, or Amhara communities (Feyissa, 2011; Habte, 2023). Anderson's (1998) concept of "long-distance nationalism" is particularly

relevant in this context, as symbolic and emotional ties to the homeland have fueled diaspora participation in protests, lobbying efforts, and remittance flows.

The framework of transnationalism offers a valuable lens for understanding these evolving engagement patterns. Portes et al. (2002) defined transnationalism as sustained cross-border activities—political, economic, and cultural—that bind migrants to their countries of origin. In the Ethiopian case, transnational actors have mobilized resources, lobbied international institutions, and influenced public discourse on federalism, ethnic conflict, and constitutional reform (Kassahun & Belay, 2022; Terrazas, 2020). This activism has occurred through formal organizations, informal networks, and increasingly digital platforms.

Digital transnationalism has emerged as a critical new arena of diaspora political engagement. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram have enabled diaspora actors to voice political opinions, organize campaigns, and react in real-time to developments in Ethiopia. Alemayehu and Gebremariam (2024) found that while these platforms have facilitated civic engagement, they have also intensified polarization through the proliferation of echo chambers, algorithm-driven content, and misinformation. Similarly, Gagliardone et al. (2023) documented how digital technologies have become both democratization tools and instruments of disinformation, particularly during periods of crisis.

One of the most contentious issues among the diaspora is the question of ethnic federalism. Supporters, particularly within segments of the Tigrayan and Oromo diaspora, view ethnic federalism as essential for safeguarding group autonomy and

cultural rights. Organizations like the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) have used diaspora networks to promote ethnonationalist claims and self-determination (Feyissa, 2011; Terrazas, 2020). Conversely, pan-Ethiopianists, notably within the Amhara diaspora, argue that ethnic federalism fragments the nation and undermines a shared civic identity. The rise of movements such as #NoMore reflects this alternative narrative, calling for unity and resistance to foreign interference (Bihonegn, 2023; Habte, 2023).

Generational differences further complicate these divisions. First-generation immigrants often retain the ethnic and political affiliations of their homeland, while second-generation Ethiopian diaspora youth increasingly adopt hybrid civic identities that are less bound by rigid ethnonational categories (Bihonegn, 2023). Though tensions persist, these generational shifts suggest a possible evolution in diaspora perspectives on governance and identity.

The Tigray War (2020–2022) illustrates diaspora engagement's potential and peril. During the conflict, diaspora actors on all sides mobilized significant international attention through lobbying, demonstrations, and digital campaigns. However, their involvement also increased political polarization and the circulation of competing and sometimes misleading narratives (Gagliardone et al., 2023).

In sum, the Ethiopian diaspora's engagement with homeland politics reflects transnationalism's dual nature: it can bridge ethnic divides and support democratic change, but it can also exacerbate polarization and entrench divisions. Scholars and policymakers stress the importance of inclusive diaspora engagement strategies, like

interethnic dialogue forums, media literacy initiatives, and Track II diplomacy, to support peacebuilding and national reconciliation.

Summary and Conclusions

The literature reviewed in this chapter reveals that ethnic federalism, as practiced in Ethiopia, embodies a deeply contested and paradoxical approach to structuring governance through the lens of identity. While the theoretical foundation of ethnic federalism—namely, the recognition of cultural pluralism within a federal framework—is not inherently problematic (Kymlicka, 2005), the Ethiopian case demonstrates the risks of institutionalizing identity without concurrently ensuring democratic safeguards, inclusive representation, and protections for individual and minority rights (Fessha & Hersi, 2022). Several scholars argue that absent a consensus on liberal democratic norms and political pluralism, ethnic federalism can foster exclusion, entrench fear, and exacerbate interethnic tensions (Taye, 2017; Tesfaye, 2013). In the Ethiopian context, efforts at self-rule have, at times, been perceived not as mechanisms for empowerment but as tools for domination, leading to political instability rather than cohesion (Ketemaw, 2020; Mesfin, 2017).

The literature collectively establishes a robust theoretical and empirical framework for understanding the structural contradictions of Ethiopia's ethnic federal experiment. A dominant theme emerging from this work is the inherent tension between pursuing group autonomy and the necessity of national integration. Scholars consistently underscore that a sustainable federal arrangement in a multiethnic society must balance ethnic recognition with inclusive, depoliticized governance structures emphasizing

citizenship over ethnicity (Gardner, 2018; Abbink, 2021). Ethiopia's federal system, shaped by rigid identity politics and elite manipulation, has often amplified grievances and deepened divisions rather than fostering equitable development or social cohesion (Yemane & Christopher, 2024; Lavers, 2018).

Moreover, the literature emphasizes that while federalism can offer a path to managing diversity, the specific design and implementation of the model are paramount. Ethnic federalism, when not grounded in strong institutions, civic norms, and shared national purpose, can undermine both effective governance and intergroup trust (Reichert, 2006; Asnake, 2020). Case studies from regions like Dire Dawa and marginalized groups like the Majang illustrate how constitutional promises of autonomy have failed to materialize in practice, often resulting in exclusion and contestation (Midega, 2017; Bewuketu et al., 2019). In response, an increasing number of scholars call for a reimagined federal framework that transcends ethnically demarcated administrative units and embraces participatory, integrative models of governance (Desta & Ahadu, 2020).

Ultimately, the literature review informs this study's research questions by clarifying the core theoretical dilemmas and practical consequences of ethnic federalism in divided societies. It identifies a critical need for alternative federal arrangements that maintain respect for cultural diversity while advancing democratic inclusion, equitable representation, and national unity (Fearon & Laitin, 2000; Esteban, Mayoral, & Ray, 2012). Ethiopia's trajectory offers both a cautionary tale and a compelling opportunity to

examine what forms of federalism—ethnic, civic, or hybrid—can most effectively serve the complex realities of a pluralistic state.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

This research aimed to investigate Ethiopian immigrants' viewpoints concerning ethnic federalism and their involvement in nation-building to benefit ethnically divided societies. To achieve this aim, an ethnographic qualitative research approach was employed. This methodology required the researcher to immerse himself in the culture and social dynamics of the Ethiopian immigrant community to understand their perspectives on the efficacy of ethnic federalism in fostering peace within the nation. As a qualitative method, ethnography provides valuable insights into the complexities of human behavior and social interactions.

This chapter presented the research design, defined central concepts, described participant selection, outlined the researcher's role, and detailed the data collection and analysis procedures. It also addressed issues related to data trustworthiness and the ethical treatment of participants. The central focus of the inquiry was on participants' perceptions of Ethiopian ethnic federalism as a governing principle of the country.

In this chapter, the rationale for selecting a qualitative ethnographic design was explained, along with the study's core concept and tradition. The researcher's role and potential sources of bias, arising from personal or professional relationships with participants, were acknowledged. Population size, sampling strategy, and participant selection criteria were specified. The chapter further included discussions on data collection instruments and methodology. Moreover, it outlined the data analysis plan and how the findings were connected to the research questions. Issues concerning the

trustworthiness of the research, such as credibility, dependability, and transferability, and ethical considerations were also addressed.

The lack of studies exploring the perceptions of immigrant communities regarding their homeland's ethnic federalism highlighted the need for this research. The absence of detailed research on this topic justified the investigation into this phenomenon. In particular, the rarity of studies examining the perceptions of Ethiopian immigrants in the United States regarding ethnic federalism provided the impetus for this inquiry. Through in-depth interviews, the study focused on the perspectives of the Ethiopian diaspora concerning the contentious ethnic arrangements and the broader implications for peace in Ethiopia.

The study drew on existing research and scholarly literature on ethnic federalism in Ethiopia to contextualize participants' perspectives. This foundation helped inform the development of interview questions and guided the interpretation of the data. The central aim remained to understand Ethiopian immigrants' lived experiences and perceptions regarding the structure and impact of ethnic federalism, particularly as it relates to national identity, peacebuilding, and social cohesion.

Research Design and Rationale

This study addressed the central research question: What are the perceptions of Ethiopian immigrants in the Denver metro area concerning ethnic-based federalism in Ethiopia? To explore this question, the research examined how Ethiopian immigrants navigated the divisive nature of ethnic politics in their adopted country to foster positive relationships among themselves and maintain connections with their homeland.

Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of federalism and theories of ethnicity, the study aimed to uncover the viewpoints of Ethiopian immigrants in the metro Denver area regarding the Ethiopian experiment with ethnic federalism as an administrative system.

The study employed ethnography to explore the culture, behaviors, and social dynamics of the Ethiopian immigrant community in Denver within its natural setting. Geertz (1973) emphasized that ethnographic researchers immersed themselves in the context under study to understand the group's cultural practices and social interactions comprehensively. As a pioneer of phenomenological research, Geertz advocated for an interpretive approach to anthropological inquiry, emphasizing the importance of understanding the meanings behind cultural practices and symbols. He argued that anthropology should be viewed as an interpretive social science rather than a positivistic one. This perspective underscored the value of qualitative insights over quantifiable data in anthropological research.

This qualitative study adopted an ethnographic research approach to examine the implications of the Ethiopian federal structure on ethnicity and its effects on individuals' livelihoods, focusing primarily on the perceptions of Ethiopian immigrants regarding institutional protections for all ethnic groups within Ethiopia. The chosen research design utilized qualitative interviews as the primary method to investigate the intricacies of ethnic federalism, specifically among Ethiopians residing in the metro Denver area who had witnessed the evolution of this political arrangement in their homeland. This approach aligned with Yin's (1994) methodological perspective, which emphasized the suitability of qualitative methods in early-stage research and in contexts where existing

understanding was limited, thereby enabling a deeper grasp of real-world settings and dynamics.

Qualitative interviews provided a valuable opportunity to observe, explore, and interpret information through close interactions with respondents. The researcher increased the likelihood of gaining a thorough understanding by employing open-ended questions that encouraged participants to elaborate on their experiences, perspectives, and personal histories. This method fostered open expression and free responses from participants, allowing for a close examination of the subjective meanings underlying their views, behaviors, and experiences. The researcher's engagement with participants enhanced the ability to grasp the reasoning behind their perspectives and the foundational thinking that informed their conclusions. In doing so, qualitative interviews facilitated a nuanced exploration of the complexities surrounding ethnic federalism and offered deep insights into individuals' lived experiences.

As a methodological approach within qualitative research, ethnography operated on the premise that the essence of the subject—such as the implementation of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia—depended on how individuals experienced it. The ethnographic analysis focused on interpreting data collected through participant observation and interviews to uncover the studied group's cultural norms, values, and social dynamics. The researcher applied constant comparison and maintained immersion in the data to identify key themes, patterns, and cultural phenomena. The researcher's assumptions and perceptions about the phenomenon were considered irrelevant. This study placed particular emphasis on the perspectives of Ethiopian immigrants in the Denver metro area

regarding the practice of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia. By examining individual experiences, embracing personal narratives, and exploring the broader significance of these accounts, the inquiry aimed to deliver the depth of analysis necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

Role of the Researcher

My positionality as a researcher is shaped by both personal experience and professional engagement within the Ethiopian immigrant community. I immigrated to the United States at the age of 26, during the formative years of Ethiopia's implementation of ethnic federalism. Like many others, I was perplexed by the abrupt introduction of ethnicity as the central organizing principle of governance. I witnessed the growing tension among Ethiopians, both in the homeland and abroad, as they struggled to define and assert their ethnic identities in an increasingly politicized context. This duality of experience—observing the consequences of ethnic federalism both within Ethiopia and among diasporic communities—became a catalyst for scholarly inquiry.

Two core motivations informed my interest in this research. First, I sought to explore how Ethiopian immigrants perceive ethnic federalism, given that it often emerged as a recurring topic in public discourse within diaspora settings. Second, I encountered numerous community members who attributed their migration, either directly or indirectly, to the effects of Ethiopia's ethnic federal arrangement. These shared narratives heightened my curiosity about the broader implications of this political structure on migration patterns, community cohesion, and transnational identity formation.

Conducting research from the dual perspective of insider and investigator posed distinct challenges throughout the study. As a member of the Ethiopian diaspora, I recognized the potential for personal biases to influence the research process. To address this, I employed strategies consistent with best practices in qualitative research, including reflexive journaling, sustained engagement in the field, and thick description to ensure contextual depth and analytic rigor (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I also utilized member checking to validate the accuracy of the data and interpretations, and I maintained a well-organized digital archive of consent forms, interview transcripts, and field notes to uphold transparency and data integrity.

In my role as a community organizer and founder of the Ethiopian American Development Council (EADC), I engaged regularly with a wide range of stakeholders—including religious leaders, youth, scholars, and civic actors—around the social and political dynamics affecting Ethiopian immigrants. Through these conversations, I frequently encountered concerns about the divisive impact of ethnic federalism on diaspora cohesion and family life in Ethiopia. These interactions reinforced the need for a community-centered study that could critically examine how ethnic federalism has shaped immigrant identity, influenced migration experiences, and informed transnational political engagement.

This research was ultimately guided by a desire to document the lived experiences of Ethiopian immigrants in the Denver metropolitan area, particularly as they relate to Ethiopia's evolving political system. By drawing on both insider knowledge and scholarly inquiry, I aimed to produce a nuanced, reflexive, and empirically grounded

understanding of how ethnic federalism intersects with diaspora life and collective memory (Ayele, 2022; Gebeye, 2022).

Methodology

The selected methodology for investigating the perceptions of Ethiopian immigrants regarding ethnic federalism was a qualitative approach, specifically ethnography. Ethnography has long been established as a central qualitative research method in the social sciences, enabling researchers to gain in-depth insights into individuals' perspectives and behaviors within specific cultural and social contexts (Hammersley, 1990). This approach involved sustained observation and in-depth interviews designed to understand the studied group's cultural norms, values, and practices (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007).

Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized ethnography as a key tradition within qualitative inquiry, emphasizing immersion in cultural settings to comprehend individuals' lived experiences better. By employing methods such as participant observation and interviews, ethnographers sought to capture the nuanced complexities of social phenomena as they naturally occurred in context (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Aligned with the broader principles of qualitative research, ethnographic inquiry prioritized exploring meaning, context, and subjective experience within defined cultural or community environments. This approach was well suited for understanding the interplay of social processes, power dynamics, and contextual factors influencing individual behaviors and perceptions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In this study, I conducted structured and semi-structured interviews with community leaders, activists, and

members of the Ethiopian immigrant population in the Denver metropolitan area. These interviews aimed to uncover their perspectives on the implementation of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia and its influence on their lived experiences abroad.

By immersing myself in the participants' social environment and cultivating dialogic relationships rooted in trust and collaboration, I aimed to produce rich, contextually grounded data. This immersion allowed a deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions and a more comprehensive engagement with the central research questions.

Participant Selection Logic

Recruitment of participants for this study was facilitated by the researcher's longstanding involvement in the Ethiopian community in Denver. Since arriving in the city in 1993, I have actively organized numerous community initiatives, volunteered as a volunteer organizer, and held leadership positions across several Ethiopian immigrant organizations. These roles included Chairmanship of the Ethiopian Eritrean Business Association of Denver, Board Chairmanship for Saint Mary Ethiopian Orthodox Church of Denver, membership on the Taste of Ethiopia Festival Committee, administration of a widely followed Facebook page titled "Ethiopian Diaspora Politics" with over 60,000 followers, and Chairmanship of Telela Ethiopian Edir. These experiences helped me to access the community effectively and to establish relationships with key gatekeepers.

In community-based research, gatekeepers often hold influence, authority, and established networks, enabling them to facilitate or limit access to specific populations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within the Ethiopian community in metro Denver, such

individuals included religious leaders, community elders, cultural organization members, and respected advocates. Gatekeepers were instrumental in legitimizing the research and fostering trust among potential participants. Following Creswell's (2007) guidance, I initiated contact with several prominent Ethiopian community leaders via email, providing a summary of the study and requesting their cooperation. Given my longstanding connections with churches and civic leaders, I received positive responses and letters of support, allowing me to proceed with recruitment. These gatekeepers helped identify and refer appropriate participants for the study, ensuring culturally appropriate engagement and greater participation.

Utilizing gatekeepers presented several advantages in the recruitment process. Their support enabled me to navigate linguistic and cultural nuances, foster participant trust, and ensure the recruitment strategy aligned with the community's values and norms (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Their involvement contributed to the study's cultural sensitivity, inclusivity, and ethical conduct. This approach reflected a strategic and respectful means of engaging the Ethiopian immigrant population in metro Denver in qualitative inquiry.

Establishing clear inclusion and exclusion criteria was essential for the ethnographic nature of this study, especially considering the sizable Ethiopian immigrant population in the area. These criteria were crucial for determining participants' eligibility and forming a coherent group suitable for in-depth cultural exploration (Mulugeta, 2020; Smith & Johnson, 2018). Key inclusion criteria included being over 18, self-identifying as an Ethiopian immigrant, and possessing lived experience relevant to the research topic.

Gender, ethnic identity, and willingness to discuss sensitive topics without fear of retaliation were additional considerations (Jones et al., 2020).

Given Ethiopia's diverse ethnic composition, the inclusion of participants from the three major ethnic groups—Oromo, Amhara, and Tigray—was prioritized (Brown, 2019). However, to prevent the overrepresentation of any one group and to ensure balanced perspectives, no more than two participants from the same ethnic group were included in the final sample. This careful consideration supported the development of a diverse and manageable participant group, thereby advancing the study's goal of capturing a range of perspectives within the Ethiopian immigrant community (Smith & Johnson, 2018).

Instrumentation

In this qualitative ethnographic study, I served as the primary instrument for data collection, consistent with the interpretive framework that guides qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted virtually via Zoom. This approach provided the flexibility to reach geographically dispersed participants within the Ethiopian immigrant community in the Denver metropolitan area while maintaining the depth and richness essential to ethnographic research.

The interview protocol was developed following a comprehensive review of literature related to ethnic federalism, migration, and diaspora identity (Brubaker, 2005; Feyissa, 2011; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). The protocol consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit personal narratives about participants' migration experiences,

perceptions of Ethiopia's ethnic federal system, and reflections on identity, belonging, and community engagement. The semi-structured format allowed for probing and follow-up questions, facilitating deeper exploration of emerging themes and participant insights.

To establish content validity and cultural relevance, the interview guide was reviewed by two academic mentors and piloted with two Ethiopian community members, resulting in minor revisions for clarity and coherence. Interviews were conducted in either English or Amharic, depending on participant preference. All Zoom interviews were conducted in a private setting to ensure confidentiality and were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and those conducted in Amharic were translated into English and verified for accuracy to preserve meaning and context.

In addition to the recorded interviews, I maintained field notes and reflexive memos throughout the data collection process. These included observations about participant demeanor, contextual notes about the virtual interview environment, and personal reflections on potential biases and emerging patterns (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). These supplementary instruments supported methodological rigor and helped triangulate the data, enhancing the study's credibility and depth.

All interview recordings, transcripts, and related materials were securely stored in encrypted, password-protected digital folders to ensure data protection and participant confidentiality. The virtual nature of the interviews did not hinder rapport-building and, in several cases, facilitated participant openness by allowing them to speak from the comfort of familiar environments.

This multi-layered, ethically grounded instrumentation process ensured the collection of rich, trustworthy data reflective of the lived experiences and nuanced perspectives of Ethiopian immigrants navigating identity and political engagement in a transnational context.

Procedures for Pilot Study

To ensure the clarity, cultural appropriateness, and methodological soundness of the interview protocol, a pilot study was conducted prior to the main data collection phase. The purpose of the pilot study was to assess the effectiveness of the semi-structured interview guide, evaluate the functionality of the Zoom platform for remote interviews, and identify any potential challenges related to language, question flow, or participant comfort.

Two individuals from the Ethiopian immigrant community—one first-generation and one second-generation adult—were invited to participate in the pilot study. These individuals were selected based on their demographic similarity to the target study population and their willingness to provide constructive feedback on the research process. Both pilot interviews were conducted via Zoom, in either English or Amharic depending on participant preference, and lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Following each pilot interview, participants were asked to reflect on their experience, specifically commenting on the clarity of the questions, the length of the interview, and their comfort with the virtual format. Their feedback led to several refinements in the interview protocol, including simplifying or rewording complex questions, reordering prompts to improve narrative flow, and clarifying terminology

related to ethnic federalism that may not be universally understood across different generations or linguistic backgrounds.

The pilot study also confirmed the technical feasibility of using Zoom as the primary platform for data collection. Key considerations such as audio quality, privacy settings, and participant consent procedures were evaluated during these sessions. Audio recordings were tested for clarity, and the process for securing and storing digital files was successfully implemented using password-protected folders, ensuring data security and confidentiality.

No data from the pilot interviews were included in the final analysis. However, insights gained from this preliminary phase were instrumental in strengthening the research design, enhancing cultural sensitivity, and increasing the reliability and validity of the study's instrumentation.

The pilot study demonstrated that the interview protocol was well-suited for capturing rich, narrative data from Ethiopian immigrants and that the virtual format provided both accessibility and flexibility. This preparatory step ensured that the subsequent data collection process was methodologically robust and ethically sound.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment for this study was conducted using purposive and snowball sampling methods to engage Ethiopian immigrants residing in the Denver metropolitan area. Participants were eligible if they were 18 years of age or older and self-identified as Ethiopian by birth or heritage, regardless of when they migrated to the United States. This inclusive approach was designed to capture a wide range of lived experiences and

perspectives related to Ethiopia's ethnic federalism policy across different migration waves, generations, and ethnic backgrounds.

Initial outreach was made through established networks within the Ethiopian community, including faith-based organizations, cultural associations, and social media platforms. As an active community organizer, I utilized my professional and civic connections to inform potential participants about the study and invite their involvement. A recruitment flyer and invitation letter were distributed via email, WhatsApp, Telegram, and local community listservs. Participants were also encouraged to refer to others, enabling snowball sampling to expand the participant pool.

Interested individuals contacted me directly to express interest and schedule an interview. Upon initial contact, they were screened for eligibility and provided with a detailed informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, data confidentiality, and the option to withdraw at any time without consequence. Consent was obtained verbally and in writing prior to beginning each interview.

All interviews were conducted individually via Zoom to ensure accessibility, convenience, and safety. Interviews ranged from approximately 60 to 90 minutes and were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol that allowed for open-ended discussion on identity, migration, and perceptions of Ethiopia's ethnic federal system. Interviews were conducted in either English or Amharic, depending on participant preference. With participant consent, all interviews were audio-recorded for transcription

and analysis. Interviews conducted in Amharic were translated into English and cross-verified for accuracy.

In addition to interview data, I maintained detailed field notes and reflexive memos to capture context, non-verbal cues observed during Zoom sessions, and reflections on the evolving analytic process. These practices supported transparency and critical self-awareness throughout the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

All recordings, transcripts, and related documents were securely stored in password-protected, encrypted digital folders. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities, and all personally identifiable information was removed from the data. Recruitment and data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, meaning no new themes or insights were emerging from additional interviews.
This recruitment and data collection strategy ensured a diverse and ethically sound process, allowing for deep, authentic exploration of how Ethiopian immigrants understand and engage with ethnic federalism in the context of their lived experiences.

Data Analysis Plan

This qualitative study sought to develop a nuanced understanding of Ethiopian immigrants' perceptions of ethnic federalism by exploring the lived experiences that inform those views. To achieve this, I employed an inductive approach grounded in descriptive phenomenology, which allowed themes and meanings to emerge organically from participant narratives rather than imposing predefined categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The inductive framework was appropriate for this study because it

facilitated a deep, contextual interpretation of how participants made sense of ethnic federalism within their personal and collective histories. As Maxwell (2013) and Roberts (2010) note, such meaning-making processes are often obscured in quantitative studies, reinforcing the need for qualitative strategies when exploring complex sociopolitical phenomena.

Data were collected through semi-structured, open-ended interviews guided by five to seven core questions aligned with the study's central research questions. These questions focused on participants' personal experiences with ethnic federalism, the perceived impact of the policy on their migration decisions, and their broader reflections on identity and community. Follow-up prompts enabled participants to elaborate on their responses, offering space for deeper storytelling and clarification. This interview approach supported the collection of rich, first-person accounts reflective of participants' sociocultural contexts (Edwards & Holland, 2020).

Data analysis was conducted using Giorgi's (2009, 2012) descriptive phenomenological method, which involves a systematic process of identifying, interpreting, and transforming meaning units into expressions that reflect the psychological essence of the experience. The analysis began with immersion in the data, which included reading and re-reading interview transcripts, field notes, and reflexive memos to gain a holistic understanding of the participants' perspectives. Interviews were transcribed using a combination of Zoom's automated transcription and Delve software, followed by manual review for accuracy and context preservation.

Following Giorgi's methodological steps, I first adopted a phenomenological attitude by bracketing personal biases and assumptions to focus purely on participants' narratives. The data were then broken into discrete meaning units—phrases or segments that captured significant aspects of participants' experiences. These units were interpreted and synthesized into emergent themes, maintaining fidelity to participants' original language, emotional tone, and cultural framing (Giorgi, 2012).

The coding process was iterative and nonlinear, as recommended by Petty, Thomson, and Stew (2012). I continually cycled between data collection, transcript review, theme refinement, and memo writing to ensure analytic depth and consistency. A thematic map was developed to visualize relationships among the emerging concepts, helping to trace how participant narratives connected across individual and collective experiences. This allowed for an in-depth examination of shared themes such as identity negotiation, perceived marginalization, and transnational engagement.

Throughout the analysis, I maintained a detailed audit trail documenting coding decisions, analytic reflections, and theme development. All data—transcripts, audio recordings, analytic memos, and field notes—were stored securely and organized systematically to support transparency and rigor. The Delve software platform was used to facilitate code management, annotation, and theme synthesis.

This analytical process ultimately enabled a rich and empathetic understanding of how Ethiopian immigrants experience and interpret ethnic federalism. By integrating a phenomenological lens within an ethnographic framework, the analysis highlighted not only cognitive insights but also the emotional and cultural dimensions embedded in

participant narratives, producing findings that are both contextually grounded and theoretically meaningful.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Establishing the trustworthiness of research inquiries is imperative (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four fundamental principles—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—as essential for ensuring the trustworthiness of a study. Credibility pertains to confidence in the study's findings, transferability denotes the applicability of findings in diverse contexts, dependability signifies the consistency and repeatability of findings, and confirmability relates to the degree of neutrality in the research process.

To enhance the credibility of my inquiry, I will employ techniques outlined by Lincoln and Guba (2005), including peer debriefing, prolonged engagement, triangulation, persistent observation, negative adequacy, and member checking. As Moustakas (1994) emphasized, long engagement facilitates a deep understanding of the study's culture, social setting, and phenomenon. Triangulation, as advocated by Denzin and Lincoln (2009), involves using multiple methods to validate perceptions and clarify meanings, such as employing observational techniques and conducting in-depth interviews with participants.

In ensuring transferability, I will adhere to the process outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which comprehensively describes the phenomenon under study to facilitate its applicability to other contexts. Rudestam and Newton (2007) suggested utilizing an audit trail to enhance the study's dependability by elucidating biases and assumptions and

ensuring transparency in the research process. Additionally, I will enlist an independent consultant to review materials and assess findings and interpretations for consistency.

In summary, by integrating techniques recommended by Lincoln and Guba (2005), Moustakas (1994), Denzin and Lincoln (2009), and Rudestam and Newton (2007), the objective is to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of my inquiry while ensuring the accuracy and reliability of its conclusions.

Ethical Procedures

Applying ethical guidelines in qualitative research, as outlined by the Walden University Institutional Review Board, serves as a foundational principle guiding data collection procedures (Walden University, n.d.). Given the absence of notable participant categories such as prisoners, children, or mentally disabled individuals in this study, additional protective measures are deemed unnecessary. Nevertheless, upholding the highest ethical standards is imperative. Maintaining the utmost ethical standards is crucial at every stage of the planning and implementation of qualitative research. (Walden University, n.d.).

A critical aspect of ethical responsibility lies in minimizing potential risks to participants to the greatest extent possible (Walden University, n.d.). This commitment to ethical considerations, including safeguarding participants' rights, integrity, and confidentiality, is fundamental in qualitative research (Walden University, n.d.). Essential ethical procedures, such as obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, ensuring beneficence, and upholding principles of justice, are paramount (Walden University, n.d.).

According to Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2008), the initial step in ethical considerations involves securing participants' consent. This study seeks voluntary participation from competent individuals who possess a reasonable level of comprehension, ensuring they receive comprehensive information (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008). Anticipating potential ethical concerns and risks throughout the research process is crucial. As Creswell (2013) emphasizes, efforts must be made to mitigate any issues that may arise before, during, or after the study, particularly during the interview process (Creswell, 2013). Given the use of personal interviews, maintaining confidentiality by securely managing participants' contact information is essential (Creswell, 2013).

In conclusion, ethical procedures are indispensable in qualitative research, guiding researchers' interactions with participants and ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of their findings. By adhering to ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, beneficence, and justice, researchers can conduct ethically sound studies that uphold and protect the rights and well-being of participants (Walden University, n.d.).

Summary

Chapter 3 detailed the qualitative research methodology employed to explore the perceptions of Ethiopian immigrants in the Denver metropolitan area regarding Ethiopia's ethnic federalism. The study utilized an ethnographic approach, allowing for an in-depth examination of participants' lived experiences and cultural contexts (Creswell, 2013).

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, facilitating open-ended discussions that encouraged participants to share their perspectives freely (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The selection of participants was guided by purposive sampling, focusing on individuals who had immigrated from Ethiopia and were residing in the Denver area. Gatekeepers within the community played a crucial role in facilitating access to potential participants, ensuring cultural sensitivity and trustworthiness in the recruitment process (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

To analyze the data, thematic analysis was conducted, identifying patterns and themes that emerged from the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Measures were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process, with informed consent obtained from all participants and confidentiality maintained by institutional guidelines (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynarden, 2001).

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This study examined how the Ethiopian diaspora in the Denver metro area perceives the effects of Ethiopia's ethnic-based federalism. The research explored the perspectives of Ethiopian community members in Denver regarding the implementation and consequences of ethnic-based federalism in their homeland. To achieve this, interview questions were designed to uncover participants' views on how ethnic-based federalism has influenced their community, personal experiences, relationships, and overall engagement. Participants were also encouraged to discuss their reasons for emigrating, their ongoing connections to Ethiopia, and their opinions on the socioeconomic and political changes since adopting ethnic-based federalism.

This chapter outlines the data collection process, including details about the interview settings and the participants involved. It provides a comprehensive account of the procedures used to gather, transcribe, and code the data. The chapter also highlights the development of themes based on the coded data, identifying prominent and less frequent patterns that emerged during the analysis. Measures to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the data, in alignment with the research proposal, are addressed. Finally, the chapter presents the results, summarizing participants' responses to the interview questions and offering insights into their shared experiences and perspectives.

This study sought to understand the impact of Ethiopia's ethnic-based federalism on members of the Ethiopian diaspora residing in the Denver metro area. Central to the

research were Ethiopian immigrants lived experiences and opinions regarding implementing ethnic-based federalism in Ethiopia. Through a series of interviews, participants reflected the effects of ethnic-based federalism on their community dynamics, personal lives, and relationships, as well as their broader engagements. They also shared insights into their migration journeys, connections to Ethiopia while living in the U.S., and evaluations of the socioeconomic and political transformations linked to ethnic-based federalism.

Field Test of Interview Questions

Before beginning IRB-approved data collection, I conducted a brief field test with two individuals who met the inclusion criteria for the main study. This informal exercise was not part of the formal research process and did not involve systematic data collection or analysis. Its sole purpose was to assess the clarity, flow, and estimated duration of the interview questions to ensure they were appropriate and understandable. The individuals who participated in this field test were not included in the main study sample. Although no research data was collected, I still upheld ethical standards such as obtaining verbal consent and respecting participant privacy. The results of the field test indicated that no major adjustments were needed, and the final instruments were used as originally designed once formal IRB approval was secured. Field tests like this are often used in qualitative research to improve the design and implementation of data collection instruments before formal inquiry begins (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Setting

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the study (Approval No. 09-12-24-0074573), interviews were conducted with all 10 participants via Zoom. Recruitment fliers were distributed at Ethiopian-owned businesses, barbershops, grocery stores, churches, libraries, and community centers frequented by the Ethiopian community, with prior permission secured where necessary. Individuals who expressed interest were contacted via email and phone and invited to participate in a semi-structured Zoom interview if they met the inclusion criteria.

Interested participants responded by affirming the IRB-approved consent form with the statement, "I consent to the interview." Interviews were scheduled based on participant availability and were conducted between January and February 2025. All interviews were conducted via Zoom to enhance accessibility and flexibility, especially considering participants' diverse schedules and locations. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed by participants for accuracy and optional comments.

In total, 12 individuals expressed interest in the study, and 10 ultimately participated—eight men and two women—reflecting a variety of ages and ethnic backgrounds. Lower female participation was influenced by cultural barriers, including hesitancy to engage in sensitive political discussions, particularly in English. Those selected were individuals who demonstrated comfort in expressing themselves openly in English.

Two participants were involved in a pilot phase to refine the interview structure. The finalized interviews were designed to foster reflection on migration stories, diaspora engagement, and experiences with the effects of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia. Participants were encouraged to speak freely, and interviews concluded when participants indicated they had shared all they wished.

The virtual format proved effective in removing logistical barriers and enabled participants to contribute from their chosen environments. The Zoom-based format and the neutral tone of the interview protocol were not found to influence the integrity of participant responses or the interpretation of the data. These interviews formed the primary source for the thematic findings presented in this chapter.

Demographics

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants representative of the Ethiopian immigrant population in the Metro Denver area. Of the ten participants interviewed or scheduled for interviews, 80% (eight) were male, and 20% (two) were female. This gender disparity reflects cultural norms that often deter women from participating in interviews of this nature, as well as their comparatively lower presence in public spaces where invitations to participate were extended. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 55 years, with 62.5% (five) over the age of 40. All participants were first-generation Ethiopian immigrants who had resided in the United States for at least three years.

The participants represented diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Amhara, Tigray, Oromo, and Southern Nations ethnic groups, as well as those with mixed

heritage. This diversity provided a broad spectrum of perspectives on Ethiopia's ethnic federalism system and its impact on their collective identity as immigrants in the United States.

The interviews will be analyzed using Delve software to comprehensively examine the data. From the outset, participants emphasized fostering unity within the Ethiopian community in Metro Denver, transcending ethnic differences. They highlighted ongoing efforts to create inclusive spaces for cultural, religious, and social gatherings where shared values and traditions could be celebrated. These initiatives demonstrate the community's resilience and commitment to strengthening connections and building a cohesive identity in their new environment.

Data Collection

The data collection process involved interviews with ten Ethiopian immigrants in the Metro Denver area. Interviews were scheduled based on participants' availability to ensure convenience and participation. These interviews detailed participants' experiences and perceptions of Ethiopia's ethnic federalism system and its influence on their identity and views as part of the Ethiopian diaspora.

Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted via Zoom Meetings to accommodate participants' preferences and ensure accessibility. The interviews were recorded with participant consent using Zoom's recording feature. Data collected from the semi-structured interviews were securely stored in compliance with the procedures approved by the IRB. No unusual circumstances arose during the data collection stage.

A semi-structured interview protocol was created and utilized to facilitate the generation of probing and follow-up questions. This approach ensured that participants had the opportunity to elaborate on their viewpoints and that the research questions were comprehensively explored. Along with recording the interviews, I made detailed notes emphasizing significant themes and noteworthy points for deeper analysis later. Following each interview, I composed a reflective journal that summarized my observations and recorded pertinent details to aid in the analysis process. To reduce personal bias, as suggested by Janesick (2004), I also crafted personal memos after each interview to promote an objective stance during the data analysis. Following the interviews, I met with participants to review their responses for accuracy and to ensure their perspectives were correctly represented. This review process served as a form of triangulation, enhancing the reliability and validity of the data collected.

Data Analysis

The data collection process involved interviews with ten Ethiopian immigrants in the Metro Denver area. Interviews were scheduled based on participants' availability to ensure convenience and participation. These interviews detailed participants' experiences and perceptions of Ethiopia's ethnic federalism system and its influence on their identity and views as part of the Ethiopian diaspora. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted via Zoom Meetings to accommodate participants' preferences and ensure accessibility. The interviews were recorded with participant consent using Zoom’s recording feature. Data collected from the semi-

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Evidence of Trustworthiness

As highlighted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research is crucial for ensuring the credibility, dependability, confirmability,

and transferability of findings. In this study, I applied strategies that were systematically implemented throughout the research process.

Credibility

To ensure credibility, Creswell and Poth's (2018) advanced advice is applied by establishing a prolonged engagement with participants, followed by iterative questioning, and member checking. Furthermore, participants in this research were contacted and offered to review and validate the accuracy of their responses, which ensured that their perspectives were authentically represented. Being the study relied on semi-structured interviews, it offered a deeper exploration of participant viewpoints, enabling to overcome the researcher bias. Furthermore, data triangulation was employed by comparing themes across multiple interviews, which verified the consistency and coherence of the findings, as emphasized by Patton (2015).

Dependability

To ensure dependability in this research process, I applied a comprehensive audit trail that enabled me to capture all critical research decisions, encompassing data collection, coding methodologies, and thematic analysis, as Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) described. The application of thematic coding was carried out systematically through the Delve software, facilitating a structured and transparent approach to the analysis. Additionally, I called up my wife and son to help as a peer debriefer. What Merriam & Tisdell (2016) advocated for debriefers' critical view as independent reviewers is to assess the coding framework and interpretations and verify that the findings align with the data gathered.

Confirmability

Cognizant of the importance of Confirmability, the two primary methods, researcher reflexivity, and reflective journaling practices, were strictly adhered to. Following each interview, I was engaged in composing reflective memos that recorded any potential biases and interpretations, thereby promoting an objective stance in data analysis (Janesick, 2004). Additionally, an external audit was conducted by friends involved in assessing specific transcripts and coding frameworks to verify the impartiality of the results. This dual approach significantly reduced personal biases and bolstered the overall transparency of the analytical process.

Transferability is a key aspect of this study. As Creswell & Creswell (2017) stated, comprehensive descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and findings are accepted and followed in this study to enhance transferability. This approach in this study will allow readers to assess the applicability of the results to other Ethiopian diaspora groups experiencing the same situations. Furthermore, as Braun & Clarke (2006) highlighted, this study added direct participant quotes to strengthen the contextual framework and offer more profound insight into the themes that emerged during data analysis. Implementing these strategies will reinforce trustworthiness, and the study ensures rigor and reliability, contributing meaningfully to discussions on ethnic federalism and the role of diaspora communities.

Results

This study presented the findings of an ethnographic investigation that examined the perceptions and lived experiences of Ethiopian immigrants residing in the Denver

metropolitan area regarding Ethiopia's policy of ethnic federalism. The research was grounded in ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which provided rich, firsthand accounts of how members of the Ethiopian diaspora interpreted and responded to the impacts of ethnic federalism. The aim was to uncover the nuanced social, political, and emotional dimensions of the policy experienced from abroad, particularly among individuals who had either lived under the system or remained deeply connected to those affected by it.

Data analysis was conducted using Delve qualitative coding software, which supported a systematic and rigorous approach to interpreting the interview transcripts. Both deductive and inductive coding methods were employed to integrate pre-identified concepts while remaining open to emergent patterns in the data. A comprehensive codebook compatible with Delve was developed and applied consistently across all interviews to ensure analytical reliability. Line-by-line coding, detailed reflective memo documentation, and thematic clustering were used to distill and interpret the findings. Through this process, seven overarching themes were identified, reflecting participants' concerns about ethnic identity, the role of governance and state power, the fragmentation of social cohesion, the spread of interethnic mistrust, and the perceived responsibility of the diaspora in advocating for national unity and reform.

Coding Methodology

The analysis process was guided by established qualitative research methodologies to ensure methodological rigor and trustworthiness (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2012). Open coding commenced concurrently with data

collection, allowing for early immersion in the data and the identification of preliminary patterns. This approach facilitated a naturally emerging perspective on participants' experiences while maintaining analytical flexibility.

A mixed coding process using top-down and bottom-up techniques was intentionally employed to capture theory-driven and data-driven insights. Deductive codes were developed based on the study's research questions and theoretical framework, while inductive codes emerged naturally from participants' narratives during interviews. A comprehensive codebook was created using Delve software to organize this analytical work systematically. The codebook consisted of six parent codes and fourteen associated subcodes, each carefully linked to one or more of the seven major themes that ultimately emerged from the data.

The analytical process incorporated multiple validation techniques to ensure depth and consistency. Line-by-line coding preserved the richness of participants' accounts, while ongoing memo-writing documented the researcher's interpretive decisions and reflections. Thematic clustering was then used to identify connections and patterns across the dataset. This structured yet flexible approach enabled thorough engagement with the data while maintaining coherence across all transcripts and supporting the development of meaningful, grounded findings. The full codebook appears in the Appendix

Thematic Findings

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts resulted in a total of 339 coded responses, representing a wide range of ideas, reflections, and experiences shared by participants. Each code was assigned to a thematic category based on conceptual

similarities, revealing patterns in how the Ethiopian diaspora in Metro Denver perceived ethnic federalism and its impact on their identity, engagement, and sense of belonging. Table 1 below outlines the frequency and relative proportion of each emergent theme derived from the initial coding process.

Table 1

Distribution of Emergent Codes Across Participant Interviews (N = 339)

Emergent Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Social Fragmentation	23	6.78%
Understanding of Ethnic Federalism	6	1.77%
Diaspora Engagement	8	2.36%
Cultural Heritage & Identity	7	2.06%
Diaspora's Role in Ethiopia's Future	8	2.36%
Social & Economic Consequences	10	2.95%
Critique of Ethnic Federalism	67	19.75%
Civic Engagement & Advocacy	9	2.65%
Political Exile and New Identity	5	1.47%
Diaspora Connection and Attachment	11	3.24%
Challenges and Criticisms	23	6.78%
Diaspora Perspectives	22	6.49%
Societal Impact	19	5.60%
Ethnic Federalism Perception	64	18.88%
Political Engagement	20	5.89%
Identity and Heritage	37	10.91%

These emergent codes were then synthesized through axial coding into five major (superordinate) themes, which captured the overarching concerns and lived realities described by the participants. Table 2 presents the number of participants who contributed to each major theme, demonstrating both the prevalence and relevance of these topics across the sample.

Table 2

Frequency of Major Themes Across Participants (N=10)

Major Theme	Frequency (out of 10 Participants)

Perceptions and Consequences of Ethnic Federalism	10
Experiences of Displacement and Insecurity	9
Religious and Cultural Suppression	7
Loss of National Identity and Unity	8
Hopes for National Reconciliation and Reform	6

Each of these core themes is explored in the sections that follow, with direct quotations and interpretive analysis used to illustrate the range and depth of participant responses. The complete coding structure is available in Appendix A: Codebook for Thematic Analysis. Full interview transcripts are securely stored in compliance with IRB protocols.

Theme 1: Perceptions and Consequences of Ethnic Federalism

Participants in this study significantly expressed deep concern and dissatisfaction with Ethiopia's ethnic federalist system. They tended to characterize it as a structure that institutionalized division and weakened national identity, contributing to cycles of violence and instability. I incorporated subcodes such as Institutional Division and Destabilization, Violence and Conflict, and Suppression of National Identity in this central theme. Portions of participants viewed the policy as a legal mechanism that entrenched ethnic boundaries into the country's political and social institutions.

One participant asserted, "Ethnic federalism did not give us equality; it gave us division with bloodshed. We started seeing neighbors as enemies, not as Ethiopians." (Participant 5). Similarly, another added, "Before we identified as Ethiopians first. Now, the system forces us to choose ethnicity over unity." (Participant 1). Participants widely agreed that the implementation of ethnic federalism fostered resentment and created a

hostile environment, particularly for those living outside of their designated ethnic regions.

While some acknowledged that the original intent behind ethnic federalism may have been to empower minority groups and promote cultural recognition, they emphasized that the policy's destructive consequences had overshadowed these goals. "The idea was good on paper—respect for identity and self-rule—but in reality, it became a source of hatred and fear," explained Participant 7. Another shared, "Instead of bringing people together, ethnic federalism has created an 'us versus them' mentality that fuels conflict rather than coexistence" (Participant 3).

Several participants also emphasized that the system had weakened national institutions and governance. "You cannot build a country by dividing it into ethnic homelands. It is like running ten mini-states with no real center," said Participant 4. This fragmentation, they argued, made it easier for regional leaders to manipulate power and for ethnic tensions to erupt into violence. "We have seen too many lives lost because people were born in the 'wrong' region. That is not federalism. It is a trap," lamented Participant 9.

In summary, participants saw ethnic federalism as a policy that, while initially intended to address historical grievances, had, in practice, deepened national divisions, legitimized exclusion, and triggered a cycle of ethnic mistrust and instability. Their reflections reflect a profound desire for unity, equality, and a system that upholds shared national identity rather than ethnic fragmentation.

Theme 2: Social Impact, Displacement, and Interethnic Tension

Denver-based Ethiopian immigrants who were interviewed described ethnic federalism significantly as a political policy and a lived reality that disrupted their sense of belonging and community, mainly through displacement, fear, and a breakdown in social trust. Under this theme, subcodes like Displacement and Fear, Breakdown of Trust, and Intergenerational Impact were coded to capture the emotional and social consequences that unfolded within and beyond Ethiopia's borders.

Many participants shared harrowing stories of being uprooted from their homes based solely on their ethnic identity. "We were forced to leave our village because of our ethnic background. It's hard to feel safe in your own country," said Participant 5. Another participant echoed this: "I was born and raised in that town, but they made us feel like outsiders overnight. My father was beaten, and we had to run in the middle of the night," recalled Participant 3.

Beyond physical displacement, participants highlighted the emotional weight of mistrust and fear embedded in everyday interactions. "People started looking at each other differently. Even friends you grew up with become suspicious if you're from a different group," explained Participant 4. Participant 2 noted, "When ethnic politics strengthened, neighborhoods started dividing. People didn't marry across groups anymore. Even churches split."

Ethnic federalism also created deep struggles for individuals of mixed heritage or those who resisted being boxed into a single ethnic category. "I don't even know what to say when someone asks, 'What are you?' My mom is Oromo; my dad is Amhara. I say

I'm Ethiopian, but that's not enough anymore," said Participant 6. Similarly, Participant 9 shared, "In some places, being mixed is dangerous. You don't belong anywhere, and that makes you vulnerable."

The emotional toll extended across generations. Several participants described how their children, particularly those raised in the U.S., struggled to make sense of their family histories. "My daughter is confused—she hears about our suffering, but in school here, no one talks about Ethiopia or ethnic problems," said Participant 10. "It's like a ghost that follows us into the next generation," reflected Participant 7. Another remarked, "We wanted to raise our kids in peace, but we brought trauma with us. They don't carry the label on paper but feel it in our pain."

For some, the interethnic tension even followed them into diaspora communities. "Even here in Denver, there's tension among Ethiopians. You can feel it during gatherings. People still whisper about who's from where," said Participant 1. "It's painful because we're all immigrants here, trying to survive, but we still carry that division." In essence, the participants portrayed ethnic federalism as a policy whose social consequences had fractured communities and displaced families and introduced long-lasting psychological wounds. The sense of insecurity, fragmented identity, and intergenerational burden described by participants underscored how deeply this political system had embedded itself into the personal and communal fabric of Ethiopian life, both in the homeland and across the diaspora.

Theme 3: Diaspora Engagement and Fracture

Participants openly discussed how Ethiopia's ethnic federalism has influenced diaspora communities, portraying a landscape of internal divisions, political polarization, and attempts at cultural preservation. This theme included the subcodes Diaspora Unity vs. Division and Cultural Preservation in Exile, reflecting the tension between fragmentation and resilience among Ethiopian immigrants abroad. Many participants observed that ethnic divisions from Ethiopia had spilled over into diaspora life, creating visible rifts along political and ethnic lines. " Even in the diaspora, we are divided. Some support ethnic politics, while others advocate for unity—we don't speak with one voice," explained Participant 10. These divisions often surface during community gatherings, protests, or political debates. " We have separate organizations for different ethnic groups, and they hardly work together. Instead of uniting, we argue over who has suffered more," noted Participant 2. This fragmentation was particularly disheartening for some, as they had hoped distance from Ethiopia might foster solidarity.

Participants recounted how ethnic grievances permeated their new environments, straining relationships in churches, cultural associations, and social settings. " At some events, you can sense the tension—like people are silently picking sides, even here in Denver, said Participant 6. Others withdrew from communal spaces altogether. "I stopped visiting a local community center because it became too politicized. I just wanted to feel Ethiopian, not pressured to choose a side," shared Participant 7.

Despite these divisions, many highlighted the diaspora's role in safeguarding Ethiopian heritage. Teaching children Amharic or other native languages, cooking

traditional dishes, celebrating holidays, and attending religious services were seen as vital ways to sustain cultural identity." We make Doro wat, speak our language, and observe our traditions. That's how we keep Ethiopia alive in our homes," said Participant 4. These practices provided a sense of continuity and pride, anchoring the community amid political strife.

Religious institutions served as unifying spaces. " The church is one of the few places where we still come together. We pray in Ge'ez, we sing the same hymns—that gives me hope, remarked Participant 3. Music, poetry, and storytelling also bridged generational gaps, fostering a broader national identity. "I play my children classic Ethiopian songs—about the country, not just one group. I want them to love all of Ethiopia," explained Participant 9.

Yet even cultural preservation efforts were not free from discord. Competing historical narratives influenced how traditions were passed down." Our stories have become contested. One group's hero is another's villain," observed Participant 5. This struggle over cultural ownership mirrored the wider diaspora divide, where ethnic federalism shaped political loyalties, collective memory, and interpretations of history.

In summary, participants depicted the diaspora as a site of resilience and division, where cultural endurance coexisted with ethnic fragmentation. While many remained dedicated to unity and heritage, they acknowledged that the legacy of ethnic federalism continued to shape relationships, historical perspectives, and connections to the homeland.

Theme 4: Critique of Governance and Demand for Constitutional Reform

Participants delivered a sharp and consistent critique of Ethiopia's ethnic federalist system, condemning it as a divisive and corrupt governance model that undermines democracy. This theme encompassed two key subcodes: Rejection of Ethnic Federalism and Call for Constitutional Reform, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with the current political order and a shared vision for a more inclusive alternative. Many participants argued that ethnic federalism was less about empowerment and more about political manipulation, deliberately prioritizing ethnic identity over national cohesion. This system was designed to divide and control the environment. Ethiopia needs a new constitution that values citizenship over ethnicity," insisted Participant 1.

Others saw it as a tool for elites to cling to power by stoking ethnic tensions." The government weaponizes ethnicity to distract from real issues—poverty, injustice, and inequality," said Participant 6. Corruption and nepotism were recurring concerns, with participants describing a system where loyalty to one's ethnic group often outweighed merit." Competence no longer matters—what counts is your background. Jobs, justice, even safety depend on it," explained Participant 4. Another added," If you're from the 'wrong' group in the 'wrong' region, you're not just overlooked—you're at risk" (Participant 8).

These frustrations fueled intense demands for structural reform. Most participants called for a complete overhaul of the constitution, arguing that its ethnic-based framework perpetuates division. " We need a new social contract, one that unites us as Ethiopians first, not as competing ethnic identities," urged Participant 2. Proposed

alternatives varied but converged on the need for a more inclusive model. Some advocated geographic federalism, where regional boundaries reflect economic and administrative logic rather than ethnic lines." Federalism itself isn't the issue; it's ethnic categorization. Regions should be based on geography, not bloodlines, argued Participant 5. Others supported rights-based decentralization, empowering local governance without institutionalizing ethnic divisions." Let communities manage their affairs, but don't tie rights to tribal identity, stressed Participant 9.

Despite differing solutions, participants agreed on the urgency of reform. Many warned that without change, Ethiopia risks further fragmentation. " If we keep this system, the country will tear itself apart. It's inevitable," cautioned Participant 10. Participants viewed Ethiopia's current governance structure as fundamentally flawed—a source of division rather than unity. Their critiques went beyond mere dissatisfaction, offering an apparent demand for a constitutional reset centered on equality, shared citizenship, and collective national identity. The call for change was a protest and a plea for a more stable and unified future.

Theme 5: Reform Advocacy and the Role of the Diaspora

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Despite frustrations with the existing political system, participants expressed hope that the diaspora could serve as a force for reform. These insights are aligned with the subcodes Proposed Solutions and Intergenerational Impact. “Ethiopia can be saved, but it must start with people abroad advocating for something new.” (Participant 4) Participants suggested that the diaspora had the resources, education, and international visibility needed to raise awareness and push for inclusive, long-term reforms in Ethiopia.

Theme 6: Cultural and Social Resilience

Despite concerns over the divisive effects of ethnic federalism, participants highlighted Ethiopia’s enduring cultural and social fabric as a powerful source of unity and hope. Under the subcode Shared Values and History, their responses revealed a collective belief that culture, rather than politics, has been the binding force sustaining the nation through periods of division.

Participants frequently referenced a deep-seated cultural identity that transcends ethnic boundaries, pointing to shared language (particularly Amharic), Orthodox

Christian traditions, music, communal rituals, and national holidays such as Meskel, Timket, and Fasika as unifying elements. ” The government may divide us, but our culture keeps us together. We must focus on that,” remarked Participant 4. This perspective emphasized how cultural memory, and social practices have resisted political manipulation, fostering community solidarity. For many, resilience was evident in preserving and transmitting traditions, even within diaspora communities. ”Even when we are far from home, we still celebrate the same holidays, cook the same food, and pray in the same way. That’s power,” noted Participant 7. Participant 2 added, ”Our kids might grow up speaking English, but they still know what Enkutatash means. That shows our culture is stronger than politics.”

This cultural endurance was seen as a quiet resistance to ethnic fragmentation. Participants contrasted Ethiopia’s long history of religious coexistence and cultural blending with the current federal system’s divisive logic.” You go to any church or mosque, and you’ll find people from different backgrounds praying together. That is who we are—not this idea of being separate,” said Participant 6. Festivals, music, and language were described as” living reminders” of a shared identity historically bridging ethnic differences.

Beyond unity, cultural resilience also emerged as a means of emotional healing. When I feel frustrated about what’s happening in Ethiopia, I listen to old songs or attend church. It reminds me of the Ethiopia I know and love—peaceful, spiritual, and united,” shared Participant 9. Many stressed prioritizing this cultural richness in national dialogue as a foundation for reconciliation. If we build on our shared culture instead of

what separates us, we can find peace," urged Participant 1. Diaspora-led cultural initiatives—such as churches, language schools, dance groups, and heritage festivals—were also celebrated for fostering cross-ethnic solidarity. We have Oromo, Amhara, Gurage kids dancing together at church events. That's the Ethiopia we should be showing the world," emphasized Participant 10. Ultimately, participants viewed Ethiopian culture not as a relic of the past but as a vibrant, resilient force. Amid political strife, it provided a sense of belonging, continuity, and hope a framework for imagining a future Ethiopia that is more united, peaceful, and rooted in its historical spirit.

Theme 7: The Global Role in Reform

While not as prominent as other themes, the role of international actors emerged as a critical factor in shaping Ethiopia's political landscape. Under the subcode International Responsibility, participants highlighted the complex interplay between external influences and Ethiopia's internal struggles. Their perspectives ranged from cautious hope to sharp critique, underscoring the need for global actors—including foreign governments, multilateral institutions, and diaspora groups—to align their engagement with Ethiopian aspirations for unity and reform.

Many participants expressed frustration with what they saw as inconsistent or counterproductive to international involvement." We need the world to stop supporting systems that divide us. Help us build something that unites, urged Participant 8. This sentiment reflected a broader concern that foreign aid and diplomatic policies have sometimes reinforced ethnic divisions rather than fostering inclusive governance. Several interviewees called for a more principled approach from the international community,

particularly in promoting democratic values and accountability. ” The West talks about democracy, but it keeps funding leaders who abuse power and divide the country, argued Participant 6. Others stressed the importance of oversight on development assistance: ”Don’t just send money, ask where it goes, who it helps, and if it supports peace,” insisted Participant 5.

The Ethiopian diaspora was also seen as vital in shaping the country’s future. Participants viewed diaspora communities as key advocates, cultural ambassadors, and sources of investment.” We in the diaspora must act as bridges, not echo chambers. We have the voice and safety to speak the truth, said Participant 3. Another added,” Diaspora groups should invest not only in churches and businesses but also in justice and education. That’s how we help the country grow beyond ethnic politics” (Participant 7).

Beyond financial aid, participants emphasized the need for international actors to support conflict resolutions and dialogue. ” Ethiopia doesn’t needs more weapons or money for warlords. We need partners who believe in peace and help us talk to each other,” stated Participant 9. There was a strong appeal for organizations like the UN, AU, and EU to take a firmer stance in backing grassroots peacebuilding efforts rather than engaging solely with political elites. Though this theme was less frequently discussed, the voices that raised it did so with urgency. ”We are not asking for intervention. We are asking for integrity,” declared Participant 10. Their message was clear: the international community must move beyond geopolitical interests and short-term aid strategies, instead supporting long-term stability, justice, and unity in Ethiopia. While external influence was not the dominant narrative, participants recognized its profound impact. Their calls

for ethical, strategic engagement highlighted a vision where global actors contribute to—rather than undermine a more inclusive and peaceful Ethiopia.

Summary

This ethnographic study explored the lived experiences and perceptions of Ethiopian immigrants in the Denver metropolitan area concerning the policy of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia. The findings revealed complex frustration, resilience, hope, and a deep yearning for unity. Participants expressed near-universal concern about the consequences of ethnic federalism (Theme 1), describing it as a system that has institutionalized division and undermined national cohesion. “Instead of bringing people together, ethnic federalism has created an ‘us versus them’ mentality that fuels conflict rather than coexistence,” explained Participant 3. The impact of this division extended into their own lives, as many recounted experiences of displacement, interethnic tension, and fear for family members back home (Theme 2). “We were forced to leave our village because of our ethnic background. “It’s hard to feel safe in your own country,” shared Participant 5.

Within the diaspora itself, participants described divisions that mirrored those in Ethiopia (Theme 3). “Even in the diaspora, we are divided. Some support ethnic politics, others fight for unity, but we are not speaking with one voice,” noted Participant 10. Yet, they also pointed to ongoing efforts to preserve Ethiopian culture through language, food, religion, and community events as acts of resilience and spiritual continuity. Criticism of the current governance structure and calls for constitutional reform were consistent across interviews (Theme 4). “This system was built to divide and rule. Ethiopia needs a new

constitution, one that puts people, not ethnicity, first," said Participant 1. Participants proposed inclusive alternatives such as geographic federalism and rights-based decentralization.

A significant theme was the role of the diaspora in reform advocacy (Theme 5). Many believe the diaspora has the freedom, resources, and visibility to influence positive change. "Ethiopia can be saved, but it must start with people abroad advocating for something new," urged Participant 4. Participants saw the diaspora as both a source of division and a potential force for unity, especially across generations. "Our kids don't think in ethnic boxes. That's our chance to break the cycle," said Participant 3. Despite political disillusionment, participants found strength in Ethiopia's enduring cultural and spiritual heritage (Theme 6). Shared traditions, religious practices, and national holidays were seen as sources of unity. "The government may divide us, but our culture keeps us together," said Participant 4. Cultural preservation was framed as a form of peaceful resistance and a reminder of the nation's deeper identity.

Lastly, participants called on the international community to play a more principled and constructive role (Theme 7). They urged global actors to stop reinforcing divisive systems and instead support peace and justice. "We need the world to stop supporting systems that divide us. Help us build something that unites," stated Participant 8. Others emphasized the diaspora's responsibility to serve as a bridge, not an echo of division. "We in the diaspora must act with wisdom. We have the freedom and the platform—let's use it to heal, not to harm," said Participant 3.

Taken together, these findings portray a diaspora community deeply impacted by the fragmentation rooted in Ethiopia's current political structure. Participants described the emotional toll of separation, the erosion of traditional norms of respect, even simple greetings, as symptoms of a greater crisis. As Participant 2 reflected, "We used to greet each other as brothers and sisters. Now, people cross the street to avoid someone from a different ethnic group." And yet, the study also captured a powerful counternarrative: one of cultural endurance, generational hope, and global responsibility.

This study concludes that while ethnic federalism has fractured trust and belonging among Ethiopian immigrants in Denver, it has not extinguished their commitment to national unity. Through critical reflection, cultural preservation, and engagement with global and local institutions, participants offered a vision of Ethiopia not defined by division but healed by shared values, history, and unwavering hope for a more inclusive future. These findings served as a foundation for the axial coding and theory-building presented in Chapter Five.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter provided a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the findings from an ethnographic study of Ethiopian immigrants residing in the Denver Metropolitan Area. It explored how participants perceived the social, political, and economic impacts of Ethiopia's ethnic federalism policy and examined how these perceptions shaped their sense of identity, interpersonal relationships, and civic engagement within the diaspora. The chapter also addressed how participants navigated their transnational identities, interacting with their homeland and host country, and how religious and cultural traditions functioned as sources of resilience in the face of displacement and marginalization (Ayele, 2021; Lemma, 2023).

The structure of the chapter was organized around several core components: an interpretation of findings about the central research question, a thematic analysis supported by participant narratives, and integration with theoretical and empirical literature. The ethnic federalism framework served as the analytical lens for contextualizing participants lived experiences, illuminating the tensions between ethnic self-governance and national unity (Mengesha, 2022; Tesfaye, 2020). Key themes emerged concerning identity fragmentation, political disillusionment, and the role of diasporic networks in preserving heritage and advocating for change.

The chapter concluded with a discussion of the study's limitations, practical recommendations for policymakers, community leaders, and researchers, and implications for future inquiry into the dynamics of diaspora politics and ethnic

federalism. Overall, the findings contributed to a nuanced understanding of how ethnic federalism reverberated beyond national borders and shaped the lived realities of Ethiopian immigrants in the United States (Kefale & Mohammed, 2020; Tadesse, 2024).

Interpretation of the Findings

This ethnographic investigation provided an in-depth understanding of how Ethiopian immigrants in the Denver metropolitan area perceive the influence of ethnic-based federalism on their social, political, and economic lives, as well as its wider impact on national unity and diaspora cohesion. The findings revealed a deeply felt consensus among participants that ethnic federalism, far from fostering national solidarity, has entrenched patterns of division that persist within diaspora communities.

A recurring sentiment among participants was that ethnic-based federalism privileges ethnic identity as the central organizing principle of society. This approach was seen as fundamentally divisive, fostering mistrust and undermining the very notion of Ethiopian unity. As Participant 3 shared, “Rather than uniting us, ethnic federalism has entrenched an ‘us versus them’ mentality that breeds conflict and diminishes coexistence” (Participant 3, personal communication, 2025). Many echoed this, describing a climate of persistent fear and suspicion. Participant 6 explained, “People are afraid to trust each other, even in America, because we always think about which group someone belongs to” (Participant 6, personal communication, 2025). These lived realities corroborate scholarly critiques that warn ethnic federalism often institutionalizes rifts instead of building inclusive governance (Kefale & Mohammed, 2020; Mengesha, 2022).

The study also highlighted how these divisions are not left behind in Ethiopia but are “brought with us,” as Participant 2 succinctly noted (Participant 2, personal communication, 2025). Several participants reflected on how community events, religious gatherings, and even business associations in Denver sometimes mirror the ethnic boundaries and suspicions of the homeland. Participant 5 described the local diaspora as “a sleeping volcano,” expressing concern that latent tensions could erupt, given the fragile nature of interethnic relations in their new environment (Participant 5, personal communication, 2025). These insights reinforce the view that the diaspora, far from escaping Ethiopia’s political legacy, continues to be shaped by it in profound ways (Tadesse, 2024; Yimam, 2021).

Despite these formidable challenges, a strong desire for unity and a shared Ethiopian identity emerged throughout the interviews. Participants spoke passionately about the importance of cultural and religious traditions, such as Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, the celebration of national holidays, and the use of Amharic, as vital sources of resilience and collective belonging. “The government may seek to divide us, but our culture remains the thread that binds us,” explained Participant 4, emphasizing the unifying power of shared customs (Participant 4, personal communication, 2025). These findings are consistent with literature highlighting the central role of cultural practices in sustaining national identity in diaspora settings (Ayele, 2021; Lemma, 2023).

Furthermore, life in the United States provided participants with new civic tools and opportunities for advocacy. Many indicated that their experiences in America encouraged them to become more outspoken and proactive regarding Ethiopian affairs.

As Participant 7 stated, “Living in America taught us how to speak up. We can’t just be silent while our country falls apart” (Participant 7, personal communication, 2025). This illustrates a heightened sense of agency and responsibility, aligning with scholarly perspectives that view diasporas as active transnational stakeholders in their homeland’s future (Giorgis, 2022; Tesfaye, 2020).

Another significant theme was the duality of diaspora life: participants saw themselves as both custodians of Ethiopian culture and agents of change. While they continued to support their homeland through remittances and advocacy, they also acknowledged the risk of replicating Ethiopia’s ethnic divides in their new communities. “Even though we are far from home, we are still connected and responsible for what happens in Ethiopia,” observed Participant 1, illustrating the ongoing connection and dual influence of homeland and host country (Participant 1, personal communication, 2025). At the same time, many participants expressed hope that the diaspora could serve as a laboratory for reconciliation and inclusive identity, with Participant 9 suggesting, “Maybe, away from the old politics, we can start new ways of working together” (Participant 9, personal communication, 2025).

In summary, this interpretation of the findings reveals that Ethiopia’s ethnic federalism has a profound and enduring impact not only on national governance but also on the identities, relationships, and political participation of Ethiopian immigrants in Denver. The narratives collected here demonstrate how historical trauma, cultural resilience, and civic engagement intersect to define diaspora experience. By centering participant voices, this study underscores both the persistent challenges and

transformative possibilities within the diaspora, positioning Ethiopian immigrants as both a reflection of homeland politics and a potential catalyst for reconciliation and reform.

Limitations of the Study

This study faced several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting its findings. The small sample size—limited to ten Ethiopian immigrants in the Denver metropolitan area—restricted the breadth of perspectives, as reflected by Participant 1's admission, "There are so many stories in our community we have not heard" (Participant 1, personal communication, 2025). Because purposive and snowball sampling were used, there is a risk of recruitment bias, with more active community members being overrepresented; as Participant 8 noted, "Most of us who come to meetings are the ones who want to talk" (Participant 8, personal communication, 2025), potentially leaving out quieter or less-connected individuals. The reliance on self-reported narratives also introduced the possibility of social desirability bias, as participants may have been inclined to present their views in a manner consistent with perceived expectations; Participant 5 shared, "Sometimes you don't want to say things that upset people, even in interviews" (Participant 5, personal communication, 2025). The geographic focus on Denver means these findings may not reflect the full scope of diaspora experiences, as Participant 7 pointed out, "People in other cities have different challenges and different stories" (Participant 7, personal communication, 2025).

Language and translation posed additional challenges, as nuances or cultural references may have been lost Participant 2 mentioned, "It's hard to find the right words in English for what we feel" (Participant 2, personal communication, 2025). The

researcher's own background and connections to the community could have influenced data collection and interpretation despite efforts at reflexivity, as Participant 9 remarked, "Sometimes we say more because you understand us, but sometimes we hold back, too" (Participant 9, personal communication, 2025). Finally, the study presents only a snapshot in time, and as Participant 6 expressed, "The situation in Ethiopia and here is always changing, so maybe we would answer differently next year" (Participant 6, personal communication, 2025). Together, these limitations caution against generalizing the findings too broadly and suggest the need for future research with larger, more diverse samples and broader contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to address the multifaceted challenges and opportunities arising from Ethiopia's ethnic federalism policy as experienced by the Ethiopian diaspora in the Denver metropolitan area. These recommendations reflect the voices of participants and are informed by recent scholarship on ethnic federalism, diaspora engagement, and national cohesion.

First, participants strongly advocated for dialogue and community-based initiatives that foster unity among Ethiopian immigrants, regardless of ethnic background. As Participant 4 emphasized, "We need more spaces where we can come together as Ethiopians, not just as Amhara, Oromo, or Tigray. Community programs can help us heal and build trust" (Participant 4, personal communication, 2025). Supporting this perspective, Fiseha and Gebregziabher (2022) argued that community dialogue and

grassroots engagement are crucial in mitigating ethnic divisions and promoting reconciliation within both homeland and diaspora contexts.

Second, educational programs that promote a shared Ethiopian identity and history should be developed and implemented in diaspora communities. Participant 2 stated, “Our children grow up in America and sometimes only hear about their ethnic group, not about being Ethiopian. We need to teach them about our shared culture and history” (Participant 2, personal communication, 2025). This aligns with recommendations by Ayele (2020), who asserted that inclusive educational efforts could bridge divides and counteract the exclusivity that ethnic federalism may perpetuate.

Third, religious and cultural celebrations that transcend ethnic boundaries should be encouraged and supported, as these events have been shown to reinforce social bonds and collective identity. Participant 6 noted, “Holidays and church events bring us together, even when politics divides us. These traditions remind us that we are all Ethiopian” (Participant 6, personal communication, 2025). Scholars such as Abbink (2021) have also emphasized the integrative role of shared rituals and cultural events in sustaining national unity amidst diversity.

Fourth, diaspora organizations and leaders should actively promote inclusive leadership and ensure representation from all major ethnic groups to avoid perpetuating the divisions that exist in the homeland. As Participant 7 observed, “When community leaders are only from one group, others feel left out. We need to include everyone if we want to move forward” (Participant 7, personal communication, 2025). Literature also

suggests that inclusive leadership structures within diaspora institutions can foster trust and collaboration (Kebede, 2023).

Fifth, there is a need for policy advocacy that urges the Ethiopian government to reconsider the rigidity of ethnic federalism and adopt governance models that emphasize shared citizenship while respecting ethnic diversity. As Participant 3 urged, “We want a system that sees us as Ethiopians first but still respects where we come from. The current system divides more than it unites” (Participant 3, personal communication, 2025). Scholars have similarly argued for reforms that balance ethnic recognition with national unity (Fiseha & Gebregziabher, 2022; Mengisteab, 2020).

Finally, further research should be conducted to explore the evolving dynamics of Ethiopian diaspora communities in other geographic areas and over time. Participant 5 stated, “What happens here in Denver is not the same everywhere. We need more studies to understand the whole picture” (Participant 5, personal communication, 2025). Longitudinal and comparative studies, as recommended by Ayele (2020), would help illuminate shifting perceptions and inform more tailored interventions.

In conclusion, the findings and the voices of participants suggest that fostering unity, inclusivity, and civic engagement—both within the diaspora and between the diaspora and Ethiopia—is essential for overcoming the challenges of ethnic federalism. By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can help create a more cohesive and resilient Ethiopian community at home and abroad. The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for interventions to tackle the multifaceted challenges of Ethiopia’s ethnic federalism. An effective resolution requires first accepting that this

problem exists, not to cover up to sustain political power by influential leaders and exerting to establish a multidimensional approach encompassing structural policy reform, active engagement of both diaspora and grassroots communities, and transformative educational initiatives. Counteracting the divisive ethnic policy that seemingly holds the country together to escape the looming ethnic fragmentation and disintegration of the country into many nations is better to foster the development of a unified national identity.

A fundamental starting point lies in the critical reevaluation and restructuring of Ethiopia's ethnic federalist governance model. As the participants' observation and much academic writing indicated, the current constitutional and administrative frameworks, which institutionalize ethnicity as the central organizing principle, have unintentionally deepened ethnic divisions and eroded national cohesion (Aalen, 2006; Alemante, 2003). Therefore, to preserve Ethiopia's longstanding history as a nation where diverse ethnic groups coexisted harmoniously, it was imperative to implement policy reforms that redirected the governance structure to emphasize and prioritize shared citizenship over exclusive ethnic categorizations. Such reforms ensured equitable political representation and inclusiveness in policymaking, fostering national unity and mitigating ethnic divisions (Aalen, 2006; Abbink, 2006).

This reorientation is important in overcoming the perceived problem of unequal resource allocation within ethnic boundaries and giving equal chances to all Ethiopians represented and served wherever they are located in Ethiopia. Additionally, strengthening constitutional protections for minority groups within regional states is imperative to avert

marginalization and ease interethnic tensions (Lashitew, 2021). Ultimately, the challenge is to balance ethnic recognition with reinforced national unity by reconfiguring federalism to accommodate diversity while promoting a cohesive political identity, which is essential for political stability and social harmony (Abbink, 2006).

Implications

The findings of this study carry several important implications for scholars, policymakers, community leaders, and diaspora institutions engaging with the complex realities of ethnic federalism and transnational identity formation. First and foremost, the lived experiences of Ethiopian immigrants in the Denver metropolitan area reveal that ethnic federalism, while initially intended to address historical grievances and promote self-determination, has, in practice, produced new layers of division, marginalization, and identity fragmentation. These outcomes are not confined to Ethiopia's borders but are deeply felt by its diaspora, who often navigate contested narratives of belonging and loyalty.

One significant implication is the urgent need for Ethiopia to reassess its constitutional commitment to ethnicity as the primary organizing principle of federal governance. As voiced by participants and affirmed in the literature (Aalen, 2006; Abbink, 2006), institutionalizing ethnicity has reinforced exclusivity rather than inclusivity, and any sustainable path forward must prioritize shared citizenship and political pluralism. Reforms should aim to preserve Ethiopia's cultural diversity while ensuring that no group is politically or socially excluded because of its size, location, or identity.

At the community level, this study underscores the importance of fostering civic spaces in diaspora settings that transcend ethnic divisions. Participants consistently cited cultural events, youth education programs, and interethnic dialogues as tools for healing and unity. These community-based initiatives have significant implications for diaspora cohesion and integration and can serve as grassroots models for reconciliation in Ethiopia.

Scholars studying federalism, migration, and identity politics can also draw from this study to better understand how governance structures in homeland states influence diaspora political attitudes and behaviors. The Ethiopian case provides a valuable lens for examining how ethnic federalism travels and transforms across borders, shaping diaspora activism, media engagement, and identity construction in diverse settings.

Finally, this research suggests the need for diaspora-led advocacy and policy engagement that supports constitutional reforms in Ethiopia while strengthening interethnic solidarity abroad. The Ethiopian diaspora holds immense potential as a bridge between global democratic values and homeland transformation. However, realizing this potential depends on inclusive leadership, evidence-based dialogue, and a commitment to a common purpose that moves beyond narrow ethnic interests.

Overall, the implications of this study point toward the need for a multidimensional approach—one that integrates constitutional reform, community dialogue, inclusive diaspora engagement, and culturally grounded education—to address the tensions of ethnic federalism and supportive development of a cohesive and democratic Ethiopian polity.

Conclusion

This study confirmed that the Ethiopian diaspora community in the United States is fragmented and disunited, as many members have brought the tradition of separation along ethnic lines from their home country to their host country. The qualitative interviews conducted with Ethiopian immigrants in the Denver metropolitan area echoed findings from other diaspora hubs, such as Washington, DC, by revealing that ethnic-based federalism has become a central force of division within the community. As Participant 2 explained, "We brought our divisions with us; even here, people sometimes stick with their group" (Participant 2, personal communication, 2025). The study demonstrated that the Ethiopian diaspora is not only highly involved in the economic, social, and political affairs of Ethiopia but also continues to grapple with the repercussions of ethnic federalism, which has intensified fragmentation within diaspora networks.

Participants widely believed that ethnic-based federalism is not only divisive but also serves as the root cause of various forms of ethnic bias and social distance among Ethiopians abroad. As reflected in the data, ethnic resentment and a pronounced "we versus them" mentality have surfaced across multiple aspects of diaspora life, including worship centers, restaurants, sports, and recreation. Participant 5 shared, "It's hard to trust other groups after everything that happened in Ethiopia, but we want to move forward together" (Participant 5, personal communication, 2025). Such divisions have eroded the social bonds that the diaspora once enjoyed, as Participant 3 observed, "Instead of bringing people together, ethnic federalism has created an 'us versus them'

mentality that fuels conflict rather than coexistence" (Participant 3, personal communication, 2025).

The study's findings revealed that the primacy given to one's ethnic identity creates fertile ground for intragroup racism and undermines efforts toward national unity, both in the homeland and among Ethiopians abroad. As Participant 6 stated, "People are afraid to trust each other, even in America, because we always think about which group someone belongs to" (Participant 6, personal communication, 2025). Despite these challenges, there were also strong expressions of hope and resilience: shared religious practices, cultural holidays, and the Amharic language served as binding forces, and many participants expressed a deep desire to transcend ethnic divisions. "The government may divide us, but our culture keeps us together," emphasized Participant 4 (Participant 4, personal communication, 2025).

Finally, while this study was limited by a small sample size and focused on a single metropolitan area, its in-depth qualitative data provide valuable insight into the ways that homeland policies continue to shape the lives and relationships of Ethiopian diaspora communities. As Participant 10 reflected, "What we think now may change if things change in Ethiopia, or as new people arrive here" (Participant 10, personal communication, 2025), indicating the evolving nature of diaspora identity and unity.

In summary, this study highlights that ethnic-based federalism has played a significant role in perpetuating fragmentation and bias among Ethiopians both at home and abroad, threatening the long-term cohesion of the diaspora. Yet, it also points to the enduring potential for cultural resilience and collective action. It is hoped that these

findings will inform future policy and community initiatives to promote unity, inclusion, and reconciliation for Ethiopian communities worldwide.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of this interview is to understand your perceptions and experiences regarding the ethnic federalism policy in Ethiopia. Your insights will contribute to a qualitative ethnographic study aiming to explore diverse perspectives on this topic.

1. Can you please provide some background about your Ethiopian heritage and your experiences living in Metro Denver?
2. How connected do you feel to Ethiopian politics and societal issues despite living outside Ethiopia?
3. How would you describe your understanding of the ethnic federalism policy in Ethiopia?
4. What impact do you believe ethnic federalism has had on Ethiopian society and politics, both historically and presently?
5. How do you perceive the role of ethnic federalism in shaping interethnic relations within Ethiopia?
6. Can you share any personal experiences or observations related to ethnic federalism and its effects on ethnic identity and relations?
7. In your opinion, what are some of the positive aspects of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia?
8. Conversely, what are some of the challenges or criticisms associated with ethnic federalism, as you perceive them?
9. How do you think the Ethiopian ethnic federalism model compares to other

Forms of governance, either within Africa or globally?

10. Are there any lessons that other countries can learn from Ethiopia's experience with ethnic federalism?

11. How does the ethnic federalism policy influence the Ethiopian diaspora community's perception of and engagement with Ethiopian politics and identity?

12. Have you observed any differences in how Ethiopian residents in Metro Denver perceives ethnic federalism compared to those living in Ethiopia.

13. Where do you see the future of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia heading? What changes, if there are any, would you like to see in the policy?

14. How do cultural and social factors influence perceptions of ethnic federalism among Ethiopians, both within the country and abroad?

15. Is there anything else you would like to add, or any aspect of this topic that we Haven't discussed it yet?

Thank you once again for your participation and valuable insights. Your perspectives are crucial to this study's depth and richness. If you have any further thoughts or questions after this interview, please feel free to reach out.

Appendix B: Delve Codebook

Delve Codebook for Ethiopian diaspora perception in metro Denver about the Ethiopian ethnic Federalism of the Study

Table B3

Delve Codebook

Parent Code	Subcode	Definition	Theme Linked
Perceived Consequences of Ethnic Federalism	Institutional Division and Destabilization	Mentions of how ethnic federalism fractured institutions or destabilized governance structures	Theme 1, Theme 2
	Violence and Conflict	References to civil war, massacres, or ethnic violence tied to ethnic federalism	Theme 1
	Suppression of National Identity	Expressions of lost Ethiopian national identity due to ethnic-based governance	Theme 1, Theme 2
Diaspora Engagement and Identity	Diaspora Unity vs Division	Discussion of how the Ethiopian diaspora was fractured along ethnic lines	Theme 3
	Cultural Preservation in Exile	Efforts to maintain or celebrate culture while living abroad	Theme 3, Theme 6
Governance and Policy Critique	Rejection of Ethnic Federalism	Direct rejection or criticism of the ethnic federalism system	Theme 4
	Call for Constitutional Reform	Calls for systemic change, new constitution, or governance reform	Theme 4, Theme 5
Interethnic Relations	Breakdown of Trust	Noted loss of trust among ethnic groups as a result of the system	Theme 2
	Mixed-Ethnicity Identity Challenges	Described difficulty for mixed-ethnicity individuals to identify or fit within the federal structure	Theme 2
Personal and Community Impact	Observations in the Denver Community	Reported how ethnic politics in Ethiopia affected local Denver communities	Theme 2, Theme 3
	Intergenerational Impact	Discussed how the next generation was impacted by ethnic divisions	Theme 2, Theme 5
Hope, Reform, and Recommendations	Proposed Solutions	Offered recommendations for alternative governance or peacebuilding solutions	Theme 5, Theme 7
	Vision for Unity and Peace	Expressed hope or envisioned peaceful, unified future Ethiopia	Theme 6, Theme 7
Global Role	International Responsibility	Called for foreign actors to support inclusive reform	Theme 7

Appendix C: Coding Methodology Analysis

This table presents a layered analysis of each code using four perspectives: the label as used in Delve, a descriptive summary, the corresponding code category in the Delve software, and a conceptual coding reflection that highlights the deeper thematic meaning.

Table C4

Coding Methodology Analysis

Code Word	Descriptive Coding	Delve Coding	Conceptual Coding
Negative Impact	Harm to unity and national stability due to ethnic federalism	Perception of Ethnic Federalism	Structural division and identity-based fragmentation
Historical Context	Reference to prior unity before ethnic federalism	Perception of Ethnic Federalism	Nostalgia and Historical National Cohesion
Comparison with Other Systems	Contrast with global federal models	Perception of Ethnic Federalism	Structural inadequacy and policy misalignment
Call for Unity	Appeal for togetherness across ethnic lines	Unity vs. Division	Collective national identity and civic nationalism
Fragmentation	Community split within Ethiopia and the diaspora	Unity vs. Division	Diasporic polarization and identity politics
Conflict and Tension	Ethnic mistrust and disputes	Effects on Interethnic Relationships	Interethnic hostility and social breakdown
Identity Shift	Erosion of national identity in favor of ethnic labels	Effects on Interethnic Relationships	Reconfiguration of personal and collective identity
Impact on the Diaspora	Diaspora affected by homeland ethnic divisions	Diaspora Perspectives	Transnational replication of homeland conflicts
Role in Advocacy	Diaspora's role in raising awareness or reform	Diaspora Perspectives	Transnational activism and civic engagement
Government Integrity	Concerns about manipulation for ethnic gains	Political Implications	Politicization of ethnicity and governance breakdown
Leadership and Governance	Need for new leadership beyond ethnicity	Political Implications	Inclusive governance and ethical leadership
Sense of Loss and Grievance	Emotional impact of division and disunity	Emotional and Psychological Impact	Collective trauma and cultural mourning
Trauma and Displacement	Psychological and physical effects of violence and exclusion	Emotional and Psychological Impact	Forced migration, persecution, and trauma
Vision for the Future	Hopes for peace and unity beyond ethnic boundaries	Hope for Change	Aspirational politics and peacebuilding
Cultural Identity	Concerns about preserving culture amid political turmoil	Cultural perspectives	Cultural resilience and heritage preservation

Appendix D: Themes/Quotes

Table D5

Themes/Quotes

Emergent Theme	Superordinate Theme	Example Quote
Negative Impact	Perception of Ethnic Federalism	"The system forces us to think like enemies." – Participant 1
Historical Context	Perception of Ethnic Federalism	"We were more united before all this started." – Participant 2
Comparison with Other Systems	Perception of Ethnic Federalism	"This is not like the U.S. system at all." – Participant 6
Call for Unity	Unity vs. Division	"We must return to seeing each other as one people." – Participant 4
Fragmentation	Unity vs. Division	"Even in the diaspora, we don't even greet each other anymore." – Participant 3
Conflict and Tension	Effects on Interethnic Relationships	"It's like walking on eggshells around each other." – Participant 7
Identity Shift	Effects on Interethnic Relationships	"I used to just say I'm Ethiopian. Now they ask 'what kind?'" – Participant 8
Impact on the Diaspora	Diaspora Perspectives	"Our community here is just as divided as it is back home." – Participant 5
Role in Advocacy	Diaspora Perspectives	"We can use our voice here for change." – Participant 10
Government Integrity	Political Implications	"Leaders only care about their group." – Participant 9
Leadership and Governance	Political Implications	"We need leaders who care about all Ethiopians." – Participant 1
Sense of Loss and Grievance	Emotional and Psychological Impact	"We lost what it means to be one person." – Participant 6
Trauma and Displacement	Emotional and Psychological Impact	"I was forced out of my home." – Participant 2
Vision for the Future	Hope for Change	"Ethiopia can still be healed." – Participant 4
Cultural Identity	Cultural Perspectives	"Our songs, our traditions, they connect us." – Participant 10