Caught Between Lines: The Recognition and Lived Realities of Mixed-Ethnic Heritage Individuals in Ethiopia

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Abstract

In Ethiopian ethnic federalism, people with mixed ethnic identities experience complicated realities influenced by several factors, including laws and social customs. The objective of this research is to examine the legal recognition and self-identifications of people with mixed ethnic identities in Ethiopia. It also identifies the perceived benefits and challenges of having such identities. The doctrinal legal research method has been used to examine the legal recognition of such complex identities. The 1995 FDRE Constitution failed to recognize them, which exacerbated social fragmentation and limited access to rights tied to ethnic identity. Additionally, a qualitative research approach with an interpretive phenomenological design was employed, involving ten in-depth interviews with students at the University of Gondar. The findings revealed three ethnic heritage identification strategies used by people with mixed ethnic identities: singular affiliation, blended identity, and categorical rejection. This research contributes to the discourse on identity politics by demonstrating how institutional frameworks intersect with personal narratives in multicultural societies. It advocates reimagining Ethiopia's approach to ethnicity to promote national unity while honouring its rich cultural diversity.

Keywords: Circumstances, Ethnic identification, Ethnic Federalism, FDRE Constitution, Mixed ethnic identity

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Introduction

Literature suggests that human lifestyle revolves around identity, and the question of "What are you?" (Olyedemi, 2013) highlights the centrality of identity in social processes (Vignoles, 2017). Ethnicity, a core component of social identity (Taylor, 2023), is fluid, shaped by cultural interactions and shifting boundaries (Barth, 1998), yet the Ethiopian federal system institutionalizes rigid ethnic categories (Abbink, 2006; Aalen, 2011). While envisioned to empower marginalized groups, the system relegates mixed-heritage individuals by customarily patrilineal descent and primordial ethnic affiliations (Mekonnen, 2022), excluding mixed-heritage identities.

The federal state structure institutionalized ethnicity as the basis of political agency, attaching fundamental rights and representation to ethnic belonging. While designed to empower groups framed as "historically marginalized", ethnic federalism brought systemic barriers for mixed-heritage individuals. Tewodros (2022) critiques the exclusionary effects of ethnic federalism, highlighting bureaucratic hurdles in accessing identity documents and societal pressures to conform to monolithic ethnic classifications. However, Tewodros' assertion about people with mixed ethnic identities appears rigid, undermining the fluidity of identities by disregarding the role of agency in negotiating belonging. Other works by Lemma (2020) and Worku (2021), on the other hand, discuss the potential of negotiating mixed ethnic identities, which contradicts the fixed categories that the state provides.

The boundaries established by Ethiopia's ethnic federal system are contested by people of mixed heritage, who are a result of interethnic marriages. These marriages create flexible identities that don't fit into the state's monolithic ethnic categories (Lemma, 2020). Teshome (2018) and Girma (2017) offer evidence of how rural mixed-heritage households blend cultural practices to negotiate social expectations. The emphasis on rural settings, however, ignores the dynamics of urban settings, where the dynamics reshape identities and interethnic interactions (Di Nunzio, 2019). Given narratives of migration, trade, and empire-building that shaped hybridity, this urban-rural divide is essential to comprehending Ethiopia's identity politics (Markakis, 2011).

People with mixed heritage live experiencing two realities (Kim et al., 2008). On the one hand, benefiting from the broader social networks, enabling them to negotiate experiences and realities between the ethnic groups they belong to. However, bureaucratic frameworks often eliminate mixed identities in favour of singular affiliations, resulting in systemic exclusion (Tewodros, 2022). These challenges are evident in the "marginal man" theory of Park (1928), although Goldberg (2012) and Brubaker (2016) reinterpret this liminality as a place of agency.

Although existing scholarship accounts for ethnic federalism (Aalen, 2011) and highlights the rights of individuals with mixed ethnic identities (Pelican, 2013), there has been no systematic analysis of how these individuals identify themselves or how the constitution recognises them. Additionally, little is known about the benefits and challenges associated with mixed heritage. This research fills these gaps by (1) identifying strategies individuals use to navigate identity choices in a system privileging singular affiliations, (2) exposing how institutional and legal rigidity conflicts with the fluidity of identities, (3) demonstrating the socio-political costs of ignoring mixedness, and (4) proposing legal recognition of mixed identities as a catalyst for inclusive federalism, advocating for reimagining ethnicity as a dynamic, inclusive force in Ethiopia's diverse society.

Objective and methods of the study

This article examines the recognition, challenges, and opportunities faced by individuals with mixed ethnic identities in Ethiopia. It explores how these individuals navigate their identities. The study advocates for legal and policy reforms for the inclusion of people with mixed ethnic identities in Ethiopia by highlighting the dynamics. Doctrinal legal research methods have been used to examine the legal recognition of people with mixed ethnic identities. Moreover, the study used a qualitative research approach grounded in interpretive phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of individuals with mixed ethnic heritage. Interviews were conducted with ten purposively selected students from the University of Gondar. The interviews allowed for in-depth discussions on mixed ethnic identities. Snowball sampling supplemented recruitment. Data saturation justified the number of informants. A second-round interview with four informants helped complete the information. The study setting was purposively selected as it offered convenience for the researchers. Moreover, its diverse student population from various regions of the country provided an ideal setting to explore mixed ethnic identities and a sense of belonging.

Table 1: Demography of informants

Name	Gender	Age	Parents ethnic background (Mother-father)	Self-identification	Mother tongue
Informant #1	Female	21	Oromo -Amhara	Mixed	Oromiffa (Also speak Amharic)
Informant #2	Male	24	Gurage- Amhara	Amhara	Amharic
Informant #3	Female	23	Tigre- Amhara	Mixed	Amharic
Informant #4	Female	21	Sidama -Amhara	Mixed	Amharic (Also speak Sidama)
Informant #5	Female	26	Gamo-Amhara	Mixed	Amharic (speak Gamo)
Informant #6	Male	28	Nuer-Amhara	Nuer	Nuer (Also speak Amharic)
Informant #7	Male	27	Tigre-Amhara	Neither nor	Amharic
Informant #8	Male	27	Tigre-Amhara	Mixed	Amharic
Informant #9	Male	25	Orormo-Tigre	Mixed	Amharic (Also Oromiffa &

					Tigrigna)
Informant #10	Female	26	Oromo- Gurage	Neither nor	Amharic

Literature review
Ethnicity, mixed ethnic identities, and Ethiopia's federal system

Ethnicity is defined by shared cultural practices, historical continuity, and a common belief in descent (Cornell & Hartman, 1996). Classical theorists focused on descent, while contemporary scholars argue that ethnicity is fluid and socially constructed through interaction and stratification (Barth, 1969; Nagel, 1998). Constructivist perspectives reject primordialist notions of fixed identities, framing ethnicity as dynamic and context-dependent (Chandra, 2012). This fluidity is exemplified in mixed-heritage individuals, whose identities straddle multiple ethnic traditions, challenging rigid categorizations (Stephan, 1992). For such individuals, ethnic identity becomes a negotiated process shaped by internal agency and external societal labelling (Nagel, 1998).

Quantifying mixed ethnic populations globally is challenging due to inconsistent definitions and methodologies. The estimated population of mixed-ethnic individuals in Ethiopia varies widely, with censuses reporting numbers ranging from 13,496 (1994) to 47,798 (1984), which are likely underreported due to political pressures, fear of discrimination, and biased data collection (Assefa, 2021). In previous Ethiopian censuses, specifically in 1994 and 2007, ethnic identification was mandatory. Individuals had to identify with a specific ethnic group, often and practically linked with their father's ethnic background. However, in the planned and later cancelled 2019 Fourth National Census, ethnic and religious identification was not compulsory, allowing individuals from mixed ethnic backgrounds to opt out of being identified by their ethnicity. Biratu Yigezu, the then General Director of the Central Statistical Agency (CSA), stated, "Anyone who is, for instance, from a mixed ethnic background can choose not to be identified by any particular ethnicity" (Dawit, 2019).

Studies by Teshome (2018) and Girma (2017) suggest that the experiences of rural mixed-heritage households in blending traditions align with societal expectations. However, those studies prioritize cultural mixedness, neglecting structural barriers that cause systemic exclusion. Another example is the study by Lemma (2020), which is optimistic about mixedness, in contrast to Worku's (2021) finding that intersecting gender and ethnic identities exacerbate insecurity, limiting access to resources and political agency. Furthermore, the patrilineal logic of descent tracing in the federal framework ignores the maternal ethnic heritage,

reinforcing patriarchal norms (Mekonnen, 2022). The scenario aligns with Park's "marginal man" concept, which posits that mixed heritage individuals are positioned in a liminal social space, experiencing exclusion while bridging divides (Goldberg, 2012).

Research on Ethiopia's urbanization by Di Nunzio (2019), demonstrates how urban youth blend traditional and international influences as they navigate ethnic labels through a variety of cultural practices. The rural-centric focus of previous studies is challenged in areas where interethnic interactions are prevalent (Teshome, 2018). Similarly, Mains (2012) investigates the relationship between class mobility and ethnic identity among urban youth, demonstrating that economic goals frequently surpass ethnic affinities.

Comparative studies offer lessons for Ethiopia. As Brubaker (2016) illustrates with his concept of "transethnic belonging", in post-Soviet states, mixed identities promote solidarity across ethnic lines, challenging state-imposed categories. Similarly, despite its historical baggage, South Africa's post-apartheid acceptance of "colored" identities serves as an example of legal mechanisms to recognize mixedness (Posel, 2001). These instances demonstrate how constitutional changes could bridge a gap in policy discourse bringing national unity and ethnic diversity into harmony. Although the literature differs on the paths, it agrees on the necessity of inclusive policies. While Fessha (2017) and Mekonnen (2022) emphasise constitutional reforms to de-emphasise ethnicity, Lemma (2020) and Teshome (2018) support acknowledging mixed heritages as a means of fostering cohesion.

Examining how states control identity and how people embrace or reject these frameworks is necessary to ensure that mixed ethnicity is legally acknowledged. Ethiopia's ethnic federal system can be viewed through the prisms of the three classical theories: constructivism, instrumentalism, and primordialism. Primordialism, associating identity with ancestry, presents ethnicity as intrinsic and fixed (Geertz, 1963). This rigidity is criticized by instrumentalists, who see ethnicity as a political mobilization tool (Chandra, 2012), demonstrated by elites who use ethnic categories as weapons to consolidate power. In contrast, constructivism emphasises the fluid, socially negotiated nature of ethnicity (Nagel, 1998), aligning with mixed-heritage individuals who transcend state-imposed boundaries (Pelican, 2013). Constructivism thus offers a pathway to reform, centring agency and legal recognition of mixed heritage. Privileging ethnicity constitutionally, Ethiopia entrenches divisions while rendering mixedness illegible (Fessha, 2017). Brubaker's "ethnicity without groups" critiques this reification, arguing that states produce the categories they claim to manage.

Mixed ethnic identity in Ethiopia: Constitutional perspective

The FDRE Constitution established ethnicity as the primary basis for political identity and restructured the country as a federation of ethnolinguistic regions. According to the Constitution (1995), ethnic groups are defined as "nations, nationalities, and peoples" that share "common culture, common descent, language, belief, and psychological makeup" within a defined territory (Article 39(5)). It reflects a primordial understanding of ethnicity as natural, fixed, and territorially bound (Barth, 1969; Nagel, 1998). The Constitution attempted to address the historical marginalization of groups by tying political rights to these inflexible categories (Fessha & Van der Beken, 2013). However, it is criticized for creating ethnic divisions (Abbink, 2006).

The Constitution's primordial framing neglects the fluidity of human experience. For example, people with mixed heritages find it difficult to precisely categorise themselves into a specific ethnic identity, as their identities do not align with the way the constitution anticipated (Lemma, 2020). Furthermore, Article 46(1) links administrative rights to ethnolinguistic identity, requiring individuals to adhere to rigid labels or risk exclusion (Aalen, 2006). It outlines the structure of the states within the Federation. It stipulates that the federation shall consist of states demarcated based on settlement patterns, language, common identity, and the consent of the people concerned. However, adhering to ethnic classifications can be challenging for people with mixed heritage (Aalen, 2006). For instance, practically, those with two ethnic affiliations are marginalized by the system's implicit reliance on patrilineal descent (Mekonnen, 2022). Second, the system overlooks urban populations where interethnic interactions are common.

The Constitution's failure to define "identity" explicitly (Wondwosen, 2008) leaves room for conflicting interpretations. Article 46(1) references "psychological makeup" as a marker of identity, implying a constructivist dimension, yet Article 39(5) entrenches primordialist criteria. This contradiction shows debates on multiculturalism. In this respect, Kymlicka's (1995) multicultural citizenship model is ideal for promoting self-identification, and the country would benefit from adopting this approach.

Data presentation

Results in this section are presented in two parts. In the first part, the presentation focuses on the identification dimensions and the associated circumstances that influence self-identification. In the second part, a presentation is given on the perceived benefits and challenges of individuals with mixed identities.

Dimensions of identification: Self-identification on ethnic basis
Identification with either side of parents' heritage
Some informants considered themselves as members of either of their parents' ethnic groups. They define themselves as having a single ethnic identity. Informants in this group did not deny their heritage of having parents from different ethnic groups. However, they stated that there is a role difference on either side of their parents' descent in defining who they are. Although they enjoyed the benefits of having parents from different ethnic backgrounds, a lack of exposure to learn about the culture of either side or one of their ancestral lines has influenced their identity development.

An informant who classified himself as belonging to a single ethnic group of his heritage discussed the influence of the cultural group he was born and raised in defining his identification. When asked about how he identifies himself, Informant #6 (father from Nuer and mother from Amhara) stated,

> I was born and raised in Nuer culture. I am happy that my parents belong to different ethnic groups, but I do not know that much about my mother's culture; I visited her family when I was 26. And I can say I am Nuer.

A connection to the culture of an ethnic group appears to influence one's identification and identity development. Thus, according to the above quote, when one is attached to either of the parents' ethnic groups, one tends to learn the culture of that ethnic group, which is also taken as one's ethnic identification.

Another informant (Informant #1, father from Oromo and mother from Amhara) also stated,

> I wish I could learn both my parents' languages and culture. It is good to know. I can say I am Amhara rather than Oromo because I only know a little about my father's side. It is easier to say I am from Amhara than Oromo.

Regardless of having a mixed heritage, informant #1 identified with a single ethnic group that is dominant in their life. Another informant #4, also stated, "If you know where I was born and raised, and if you know the language I speak, it indicates my father's ethnic group."

This informant's birthplace and mother tongue are also referenced in their ethnic identification. The level of attachment to either parent was also raised as a

factor influencing self-identification. Informant #7 (father from Tigre and mother from Amhara) stated, "I see myself in my mother's ethnic group; I don't know my father, he died when I was a child. I feel a deeper connection to my mother. I identify myself this way."

Furthermore, informant #6 also referenced the lineage tracing tradition of his area to identify himself with his father's ethnic group. He stated "In our culture, a child belongs to the father's ethnic group. Even though I am different on my mother's side, I must identify as Nuer (my father's ethnic group); that is how it works."

From the respondent's perspective, such traditions of lineage tracing closed the opportunity to identify oneself with two ethnic groups simultaneously. Another informant also echoed this and identified himself with a 'neither nor' (ambiguous) category for his reason. Informant #10 stated, "In our community, children are known to their fathers' side; whatever ethnic group a mother belongs to, a child belongs to the father's ethnic group." In those circumstances, individuals of mixed ethnic heritage tend to affiliate with a single ethnic group.

Mixed ethnic (ity) identification

Informants in this category identify as of mixed ethnicity rather than emphasizing one part of their heritage. They tend to view themselves as having inherited a mixture of two different ethnic groups. Ethnic heritages of both of their parents appeared equally crucial to these respondents. An informant #5 (Father Gamo and Mother Amhara) who identified herself as of mixed ethnic identity stated "I identify myself on two sides; I am the result of my parents, and I can't say, 'I am only one ethnic group. I feel like I am losing their ethnic group."

Identifying oneself with a mixed ethnic group is considered a way of managing the consequences of denying either of one's heritages. This is also argued that "I am mixed…I can speak the languages of my parents…it helps me when it is needed. I use both of my heritages based on situations." Here, a mixed ethnic category is also understood as something that can be seen separately.

Another informant #8 (father from Tigre and mother from Amhara) identifying with a mixed ethnic heritage associated ethnic definition with blood relationship. He stated, "I have the blood of my parents. I have it equally. I am a mix of their ethnic groups." This position of identifying with mixed ethnic heritage is also supported by one's connection to relatives of both sides. Informant #5 (father is from Gamo and mother from Amhara) stated "I have many relatives, uncles, aunts, from my parents' sides. It is good to grow around them. I am pleased about that. Because they are around, it makes me what I am now."

Thus, informants in this category had mixed ethnic pride. Their connection to their relatives is also a source of their ethnic makeup. For this reason, a

respondent indicated that "identifying with either of my parents' ethnic groups is difficult."

'Neither Nor' (ambiguous) identification
'Neither Nor' Identification refers to individuals of mixed ethnic background who wish to fully describe their diverse ethnic background but are limited by external factors. These constraints include societal pressures, bureaucratic forms, or institutional categories that do not accommodate their complex identities. As a result, these individuals often find it challenging to accurately represent their mixed ethnic backgrounds. Their interest involves describing details of their ethnic background and belonging to both a mother's and father's side: Informant #2 (father from Guraghe and mother from Amhara) stated "I wish I could say 'I am this on my mother's side and I am that on my father's' side." However, informants have noted that such expressions are challenging. "I can't say 'I am both' or 'I am mixed'. I have to look at the available options, then choose one." They mentioned the lack of either 'mixed ethnic' or identification into two ethnic categories in the official or standard ethnic category of Ethiopia. Informant #10 (father from Oromo and mother from Guraghe) stated,

> I know I am mixed; my parents are different in ethnicity, but identifying myself with either of the ethnic groups, I don't feel comfortable identifying myself with ethnicity, and I feel like I am playing politics; I'm not too fond of that.

Informant #10's contention is related to her perception of ethnicity in association with the country's political situation. Informant #9 (father from Oromo and mother from Tigre) also stated,

> For me, ethnicity is a matter of culture. So, I grew up in a city, and it is difficult to identify which culture is in the city. There are many ethnic groups around. Neighbors and friends speak different languages and have different religions. That is how I grew up. It is difficult to say I am this, I'd better say I am Ethiopian.

The above statement echoed that the respondent also has a sense of transcending ethnic categories to come up with an identification of oneself. So, while some respondents try to find an inclusion in an existing ethnic category, others shift to a non- existing ethnic boundary, indicating that ethnic boundaries are blurred because of special factors. However, informants also noted the obligatory conditions to choose ethnicity and admitted their choice as a "default ethnicity."

Informant #9 also mentioned the unavailability of an ethnic group that is important in self-identification and developing a sense of belonging. He rationalized his identification into 'neither nor' ethnic identification:

> I can't find a place to put myself in a classification of ethnicity. When I see people running to their ethnic group for a particular purpose, I bother myself about where to go and find a member. We don't have an ethnic group called mixed, which would have been the right group; it is better than being nothing, and avoiding ethnic identification. It is not clear. It is confusing whether I am an Oromo or a Tigre; both are good, and I am comfortable with that. But when people want to know who I am, I usually tell them the whole story. I will say, 'My father is this, and my mother is this.' That means mixed.

The above statement indicates the doubt of identification of which ethnic group an individual belongs to and the use of the self-identification "mixed" to deal with identity questions.

Ethnic identification and influencing factors

Participants highlighted factors influencing ethnic identification. Key factors include parental ethnic groups, official categorization, social labeling, socialization processes, and descent tracing traditions. These overlapping elements create ambiguity, impacting individuals' ethnic identification.

External pressures to conform to dominant ethnic narratives further complicate self-identification. Patrilineal descent traditions in Ethiopia marginalize mixed-heritage individuals by ignoring maternal lineage. Geographic and cultural context also play a role, with urban areas offering more flexibility compared to rigid rural boundaries. This vagueness leads people to adopt the label "mixed," rejecting strict classifications and claiming hybridity. Attachment to family lineage, official classifications, social labeling, and cultural exposure all have an impact on self-identification, leading to identification with the ethnic group of one parent, mixed heritage, or an ambiguous "neither nor" category. These identifications demonstrate the dynamic nature of ethnic identity among people of mixed heritage, as it is shaped by social interactions, cultural exposure, and personal experiences.

Perceived opportunities of mixed heritage

Informants were asked if there were any benefits to having parents from different ethnic backgrounds. The perceived advantages of descending from parents of distinct ethnic groups are discussed in the section that follows.

Pluralistic perspective

According to the study's informants, having a mixed ethnic heritage is essentially enriching and offers a wealth of chances for personal development and cultural exploration. One recurring theme in the stories was that people with mixed ethnic backgrounds saw their heritage as a special way to interact with different cultures. This exposure aided the development of a flexible and complex ethnic identity in addition to making it easier to acquire cultural knowledge. Informants emphasized their capacity to move between various cultural contexts, cultivating flexibility and receptivity.

Respondents also mentioned how crucial their mixed heritage is in creating wide-ranging social networks that cut across many cultural groups. They benefit from a diverse range of cultural customs, beliefs, and viewpoints, which gives them a rich experience of relationships. In their reflections on their experiences in diverse social circles, informants reported feeling more empathetic toward people, which in turn fostered a deeper comprehension and admiration of various cultural narratives. The experiences of the informants demonstrate how having a mixed heritage can catalyze cross-cultural communication.

Moreover, informants also expressed a sense of cultural relativism that influenced their views toward cultural diversity, comparing their experiences of their peers from monoethnic backgrounds. Informants discussed their ability to accept the subtleties and complexity of culture, which led to a deeper regard for the tenets of cultural relativism.

Informant #5 (Father Gamo and Mother Amhara), who identified herself as mixed, stated, "I think I am open to different cultures than my friends born to parents of similar ethnic groups, I can accept and deal with diverse cultures and people of different backgrounds".

Another Informant #7 (Father Tigre and Mother Amhara) also indicated that being open to learning cultures of other ethnic groups is a fortune of descending from mixed ethnic heritage. Respondent depicted, "I can easily adapt to diverse cultures. I think it is important to know about other cultures."

Furthermore, Informant #8 (father from Tigre and mother from Amhara) also associates one's openness to socialization and friendly behaviour with mixed ethnic heritage.

> I can be a friend to everyone...I can easily communicate with people. This is probably because I was raised that way…in a home with mixed culture. It gives you the behaviour of openness, and I can be a friend of others who don't look like me.

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Informant #10 (father from Oromo and mother from Guraghe) also spoke about the importance of descending from different heritages in a way to understand ethnicity. It is perceived as a way of learning about diverse cultures.

> When you are born from a single ethnic group, there is a tendency to favour that ethnic group. In such cases, one's ethnic group may appear as a standard. But for me, I see all ethnic groups equally, not only my parents' ethnic group, but all ethnic groups have good and bad things. And I feel I got this attitude because I am mixed.

The quotes echoed how descending from a mixed ethnic group is important in shaping the attitude of individuals towards ethnic relativism.

Flexibility of ethnic identification

Informants also indicate that, based on situations, mixed heritage gave them the flexibility to pick either of their ethnic backgrounds. These individuals tend to show greater flexibility and openness in their thoughts and tend to have a more positive view of having a mixed ethnic heritage.

One of the most important benefits of having mixed heritage, according to informants, is the flexibility it provides regarding ethnic identification. They pointed out that their capacity to switch between their diverse cultural backgrounds depended on the social setting in which they were situated. They might, for example, embrace and identify more strongly with one ethnic heritage during family gatherings while also participating in the cultural practices and traditions of another in other contexts. In addition to its use, this flexibility promotes a view of cultural identity as malleable and situation specific.

Accordingly, because it forces them to move between various values and traditions, informants said that this flexibility helped them develop a more expansive worldview. People with mixed heritages are better able to build interpersonal relationships across cultural boundaries, which frequently translate into improved communication and problem-solving skills. Additionally, it was noted that informants were more likely to support cultural pluralism accepting and celebrating varying cultural identities. Accordingly, people of mixed heritage have flexible attitude towards their identities, and they tend to be tolerant and understanding in larger social settings.

A noteworthy feature of living with a mixed ethnic background is the strategic management of one's and others' perceptions. In particular, the stories show how people use their dual identities for practical ends, frequently identifying or adapting to one ethnic group over another in order to take advantage of opportunities. In her reflection, "I used to change my ethnicity when it is important,

I can divert other people's perception of me," Informant #1 (Mother Amhara and Father Oromo) exemplifies the adaptive strategies used by people with mixed heritages to foster familiarity and connection in a variety of social contexts. Those individuals strengthen their social capital by mitigating barriers of acceptance by conforming to the cultural norms of others.

This ability to change one's ethnic identity is frequently seen as a type of social manoeuvring in which a person tries to maximize their interpersonal dynamics in a variety of settings. The idea of ethnicity as a resource for adaptation is consistent with identity management theories, which hold that people actively create their social identities in reaction to external circumstances (Goffman, 1959).

In instances where the stakes for acceptance are high, individuals with mixed heritages dynamically negotiate their identities to achieve perceived social advantages.

Informant #5's (father from Gamo and mother from Amhara) observation that "you can get a favour from others as they know you are one of them" further elucidates the instrumental implications of managing perceptions. This sentiment reflects the understanding that ethnic identification can serve pragmatic purposes by securing social support and enhancing relational ties. In contexts where shared cultural identities are valued, aligning oneself with a particular ethnic group enhance trust and collaboration, particularly beneficial in communal environments. Having mixed heritage is perceived as an opportunity to manage others' perception of who one is.

It is acknowledged that having mixed heritage could be used as a tactic for controlling one's identity in a way that conforms to other people's expectations. This case is highlighted in Informant #5's commentary, which implies that modifying one's ethnic identity according to the social context is a tool for building relationships and winning favor. In multicultural contexts, where people may gain from being seen as belonging to a specific ethnic group, this flexibility is advantageous in a variety of interactions.

People who draw from their mixed heritage practice what sociologist Erving Goffman called "impression management," which is the deliberate shift of identity presentations to conform to the expectations of their audience (Goffman, 1959). Doing this, people successfully negotiate the intricacies of social settings and create connections that might not otherwise be possible. People can lower possible barriers to acceptance by demonstrating their affiliation and competence, for instance, by speaking certain language. According to informant #5's statement, this identity fluidity promotes a sense of trust and belonging, suggesting that people may be more willing to help and support someone when they believe they are an "insider" or a part of their community.

Accordingly, the multifaceted nature of mixed heritage opens a dialogue about the broader implications of identity fluidity in multicultural societies. Thus, embracing mixed heritage as an opportunity for managing perceptions enriches both personal identity and social interactions, allowing individuals to forge valuable connections while also reflecting the fluidity of ethnic identification in contemporary contexts.

Discussion, conclusion and implications

The research reveals the complex reality of people with mixed ethnic identity in Ethiopia, offering critical insights into how they identify, and constitution does recognize them. The legal analysis part of the paper argued for policy and legal reforms. The legal frameworks shall acknowledge the realities of mixed ethnic identity and need to recognize self-identification, beyond patrilineal mandates, and the introduction of a "mixed" category could mitigate erasure and foster inclusivity. Embracing mixed ethnic identities as agents of social unity, rather than abnormalities, could change/modify Ethiopia's ethnic federalism into an all-inclusive system that celebrates mixedness.

By analyzing the findings of the research with the existing literature, this discussion contextualizes the three perspectives of self-identification—singular affiliation, mixed identity, and ambiguous ("neither nor") categorization—within broader theoretical and socio-political discourses. For instance, informants who adopted a singular affiliation often cited cultural exposure (e.g., language, birthplace) and lineage traditions (e.g., patrilineal descent) as decisive factors. This aligns with Gray's (1997) assertion that ethnicity is tied to "historical continuity" and shared customs, yet challenges Cornell and Hartman's (1996) argument that descent is diminishing in relevance. In Ethiopia's context, the Constitution's primordialist definition of ethnicity reinforces singular affiliations by practically privileging patrilineal descent, thereby marginalizing maternal heritage (Mekonnen, 2022).

Informants embracing a mixed identity reflect the constructivist view that ethnicity is dynamic and multifaceted (Chandra, 2012). Their narratives of cultural syncretism—such as bilingualism and dual kinship ties—mirror Teshome's (2018) observations of rural mixed-heritage households in Ethiopia. However, the absence of explicit legal recognition for mixed heritage forces these individuals into bureaucratic limbo, echoing Fessha's (2017) critique of Ethiopia's "ethnicized" federal system. The ambiguous ("neither nor") identification category underscores the limitations of state-imposed ethnic categories. Informants resisting monolithic labels, such as those identifying as "Ethiopian" rather than affiliating with a specific ethnic group, exemplify Park's (1928) "marginal man" theory, where mixedness creates liminality. The research participants also highlighted cultural

responsiveness, open social networks, and intercultural negotiation as key advantages of mixed heritage. In this respect, they align with theories of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and cultural relativism (Radhakrishnan, 1987), indicating how mixedness fosters adaptability and pluralistic worldviews. For instance, Informant #5's openness to diverse cultures aligns with Nagel's (1998) dialectical model of identity. That is where self-perception and external labeling work together vigorously. In some cases, the instrumentality of identity—such as strategically aligning with one ethnic group to gain social capital—indicated Goffman's (1959) impression management theory. However, this pragmatism conflicts with instrumentalist perspectives that undermine ethnicity to a mere "tool" (Esteban et al., 2012). The research participants' stories indicate emotional stakes in identity negotiation, confronting instrumentalism's disregard of cultural and affective elements (Chandra, 2012). Lastly, the research participants' experience with legal and bureaucratic classification of identity—such as being forced to choose a single ethnic group shows Anthony's (2010) assertion that government instrumentalizes ethnic boundaries. This systemic elimination preserves what Tewodros terms "double consciousness," where people with mixed ethnic identities traverse contradictory societal expectations.

The findings of the research also reveal the perceived benefits of people with mixed ethnic identities including enrichment, identity flexibility, and strategic social navigation. The participants also emphasized their mixed ethnic identity as an opportunity to cultural exploration, fostering adaptability and empathy. This can be taken as an advantage to promote balanced cultural evaluations. Besides, mixed ethnic identity allows individuals to fluidly align with different ethnic identities, enhancing problem-solving and communication skills. This is enhancing inclusivity and confronts rigid aspects of ethnic identity. Participants tactically manage their mixed identity to boost social interactions, build trust and facilitate a diverse dialogue.

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