

# Contested Citizenship through Ethnic Naturalization in Gambella Region of Ethiopia

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## Abstract

*The Gambella region of Ethiopia is a socio-political hotspot where issues of citizenship and ethnic identity intersect with historical grievances and modern migration dynamics. Ethiopia's federal system, which ties citizenship and political rights to ethnic identity, has created tensions in Gambella, a region known for its ethnic diversity and proximity to South Sudan. The process of ethnic naturalization where migrants or refugees integrate into local ethnic groups has often sparked disputes over land ownership, political representation, and access to resources.*

*These challenges are exacerbated by the influx of South Sudanese refugees, whose alignment with indigenous or dominant ethnic groups has intensified local competition and conflict. Furthermore, ambiguities in national citizenship laws and their inconsistent application at the regional level have contributed to exclusionary practices and social fragmentation.*

*This study examines the historical, legal, and socio-political dimensions of contested citizenship in Gambella, highlighting the role of ethnic naturalization in shaping intergroup relations and governance. The study used qualitative research approach through document analysis of the existing secondary data such as conceptual, theoretical and empirical literature reviews. It concludes by recommending policy reforms that build on shared needs and interests between citizens and refugees, strengthening institutions to tighten law that regulate refugees activities to be compliance with host country supreme law and create a situation to facilitate the formal naturalization of refugees according to the country constitution.*

**Keyword:** Contested Citizenship, Refugees and Migration, Ethnic Naturalization in Ethiopia

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## 1. Introduction

Citizenship has been a center of attention in political theory. There are various different meanings attached to the concept of citizenship. On the one hand, there are questions related to migration from one country to the other. These questions often relate to residence permits, the right to vote or to seek asylum. On the other hand, there are questions within a polity such as the questions of equal treatment of citizens, who may come from different backgrounds (Iija 2011).

The Center for the Study of Citizenship (CSC) defines citizenship as a membership in a community. This definition allows us to define our reach broadly, focus upon social inclusion as well as exclusion, and yet still fit the realm of citizenship (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/citizenship>).

Citizenship is one of the constitutional rights given to the people by the law of the land either through birth, family, marriage, economic, naturalization and/or legalization. The term is applied to distinguish between citizens and non-citizens in the same country. However, there are areas and times in which the same citizens of

one sovereign state identify themselves in certain ways as such natives/founders or indigenous and consider others as using other terms like migrants.

The question of who is a citizen and who is not is often fundamental in multi-ethnic states or multinational states, for that matter. In multinational states like Ethiopia, the possession of citizenship can mean different things to different groups, including political power and the ability to enjoy the rights of citizens, such as the right to residence, the right to work, owning property, owning land, acquiring education, being married, and so on, as well as the duties of citizens (Zecharias Fassil, 2020).

Since the introduction of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopian (FDRE) Constitution in 1995, the term indigenous has long held contentious meaning in Gambella region where its inhabitants are similar with their neighboring South Sudanese due to its particular history (FDRE,1995). Unlike most of Ethiopians, Gambellians, Benishangul-Gumuz and Southern Omos are topically different from the rest in many aspects. Migration has been a feature of life for the people that lived along the Ethiopia and its western borders neighboring for a long time.

However, with the formation of territorial boundaries and state structures during and after colonialism, along with the re-alignment of associated political and economic interests, certain aspects of migration had taken place on, particularly, a significant political profile (Regassa, 2010).

Most of the theoretical writings on citizenship highlight the divisions between indigenous /natives/ and migrants, which led to a differentiated and unequal form of citizenship, often along with the ethnic lines, with land being a major factor that was weighed into claims for citizenship (Remula, 2016).

Gambella Peoples' National Regional State's experience makes an interesting case because of the nature of its population and settlement dynamics. The region has inhabitants who consider themselves as indigenous/natives/ population, those from different parts of Ethiopia, the so called highlanders or migrants from within the country (Ethiopia) and refugees from South Sudan (Dereje, 2011). The distinct experiences of the different population groups, which later formed communities strongly bound by ethnic identities, largely affected the sense of belonging to the region and the meaning of indigenous for the people, causing certain contested rights to different aspects like the political and indigenous rights. This is further reinforced by the current Ethiopian constitution where by the system emphasized on ethnicity as the primary source of citizenship, leading to the construction of citizenship based on ethnic rather than civic identities (*ibid*,2011).

Ethiopia took the lead regarding citizenship law in Africa by having the first written citizenship law. This may be attributed to the fact that Ethiopia has had a strong local governance structure and dealings with other countries for millennia, keeping its national identity intact (Zecharias Fassil, 2020). The country rulers' were well aware of the fact that maintaining the political identity of the people is key to administration, governance, international relations and independence.

In general terms, citizenship laws are based on two basic concepts: *Ius soli* (which is literally the law or right of the soil or land), whereby citizenship is earned through being born in a given country; and *Ius sanguinis* (the law or right of blood), whereby citizenship is earned through descent from parents who themselves are or were citizens of a particular state (Kymlicka, 2000).

Some legal scholars agreed that citizenship is a concept which involves three cardinal considerations, namely *conferring legal status on individuals*, *enabling individuals to be political agents*, and *membership of a community and identity*. Accordingly, citizens were defined on the basis of their experiences as subjects of states, which led to Ethiopians being variously characterized as citizens and subjects in their homelands during the imperial period (Zecharias Fassil, 2020).

Therefore, it is critically important for the policy makers and other stakeholders to be empirically informed about how some communities have been informally acquire Ethiopian citizenship. Thus, why citizenship is contested in Gambella Region? Why ethnicity is used to facilitate informal integration in Gambella Region? What are the implications of the informal integration through naturalization of refugees in Gambella Region of Ethiopia?

## **2. Literature Reviews**

### **2.1. Citizenship/Nationality**

This article uses the terms *citizenship* and *nationality* interchangeably as they both refer to the same thing in the Ethiopian context. This conceptualization of citizenship provides a level of privilege and is a “link between a

person and the state or an individual and a nation” (Beaman, 2016). However, many also suggest that citizenship is not only legal membership but a feeling of belonging. If a citizen feels a sense of belonging to a particular place or people, they may also feel more responsibility for their actions within their community (O’Brien, 2011). Likewise, citizenship relies on a set of values, which include responsibility, respect, equality, helpfulness, justice, ethics, sensitivity, dedication, honesty, and freedom. These values are then reflected in skills such as participation, literacy, communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, decision-making, cooperation, awareness, empathy, and questioning (Gökçinar & Dere, 2024).

However, as this article questions the legitimacy of acquiring citizenship in Gambella region, it uses a legal definition without needing to refer to other definitions. Accordingly, International Court of Justice (ICJ) case law gives a comprehensive legal definition of the term citizenship. In the 1955 *Nottebohm* case, nationality is defined as follows:

*According to the practice of States, to arbitral and judicial decisions and to the opinion of writers, nationality is a legal bond having its basis as a social fact of attachment, a genuine connection of existence, interest and sentiments, together with the existence of reciprocal rights and duties.*

In this definition, the defining elements of citizenship are a legal bond, a genuine connection of existence and reciprocal rights and duties. Similarly, a definition by an Ethiopian jurist who wrote the first article on nationality law in Ethiopia, Fasil Nahum, is that it is “the relationship of allegiance, protection and identification which an individual has with a state. Nationality is a status that results from both act and intent, and usually entails participation in the functions of the state (Fasil, 1997)”. This is the definition adopted and to be operationalized in this article.

According to Fasil, *ius soli* and *ius sanguinis* have become the principles with which many states determine nationality. Even though their theoretical classification is easy, their practical application is not as easy as one might assume. Some states use a compromise between the two, some adhere to one of them, and in a considerable number of nation states both principles are applicable. In this complex scenario, marriage is one of the determining variables.

The complexity of nationality law has caught the attention of states. In 1930, there was a Hague Convention on conflict of nationality laws. This convention aspired to uniformity. Historian jurists like Fasil Nahum have stated that this convention served as a foundation for Ethiopia’s 1930 nationality law, which helps explain the content and shape of the imperial nationality law (*ibid*, 1997).

## **2.2. Ethnicity, Informal Integration and Naturalization of Refugee**

### **2.2.1. Ethnicity**

The ethnic group and its derivatives such as ethnicity and ethnic identity are central to the conception of contested citizenship. Integration of refugees into the host economy has become a major policy challenge in recent years. A prominent concern among policymakers is that refugee settlement in locations with high concentrations of co-ethnics or kinships increase integration (Martén, et al, 2019).

According to the primordialist approach to ethnicity, *the fundamental cultural differences and divergent values* between ethnic groups inevitably results in a ‘clash of cultures’ and the emergence of ethnic violence that can lead to a war (Rüegger, 2018). However, constructionist approach to ethnicity stated that ethnicity is socially constructed. It is made through social interaction, by both elites and ordinary people. Constructionist approach further stated that discursive formations, or cultural systems, intrinsically result in the construction of ethnic difference, as they portray culture as an unchanging force central to the construction of ethnicity.

It is suggested that marginalized members of ethnic groups contest existing ethnic identities, thereby constructing new ones, which, in turn, can result in retaliatory violence from those elites who benefited from the previous form of ethnic identity. Optionally, marginal ethnic group members may also employ violence aimed at other ethnic groups, which helps them gain increasing acceptance from established members of their own ethnic group (*ibid*, 2018).

Constructionist approach also stated that discursive formations, or cultural systems, intrinsically result in the construction of ethnic difference, as they portray culture as an unchanging force central to the construction of ethnicity. With regard to ethnic conflict, the constructionist approach focuses on the capacity of dialogue or exchanging ideas to influence members of one ethnic group to view members of another as natural target of violence (*ibid*, 2018).

Finally, constructionist approach (cited in Eriksen, 2002) stated the role of broad *social, political* and *economic forces* in the construction of ethnicity, which is preoccupied with the processes of ethno-genesis, or the process leading to the emergence of ethnicity. Ethno-genesis is the process that is, often, linked to colonialism, globalization, modernity/modernization, nationalism and the formation of the 'nation state'. Wetherell (2010) described that identity, being innate and persistent, is being systematically challenged. Contemporary studies of identity are increasingly pointing to its multi-faceted and fragmented nature.

Dagnino (2005) also presented a sweeping analysis that tackles the emergence of citizenship across Latin America. She explained how citizenship has been heavily influenced by identity politics, as 'Black' and indigenous movements had connected their own identities with the redefinition of citizenship.

### 2.2.2. Integration

Since the end of World War II, millions of immigrants from developing countries have settled in Western Europe, as immigration and issues related to the integration of these settlers have become highly salient political issues in Europe over the past six decades. During the postwar recovery, many European countries began to import temporary labor or workers who initially came from Southern Europe and later from former colonies and other developing countries. With the economic slowdown of the early 1970s, most European countries stopped importing labor. As a result, many of the temporary workers settled permanently, and owing to family reunification and asylum policies, and large flows of immigrants and asylum seekers continued to enter Europe as reunifying immigrants (Givens, 2017).

There is also an overwhelming consensus that having citizenship has positive effects on immigrant political and economic integration, while evidence that citizenship causes socio-cultural integration is more mixed. So, while the stakes of getting citizenship and the politics that make citizenship available (or not) are immensely consequential for economic and political outcomes, we see the tenuous nature of belonging through the contingent relationship between bearing a passport and social inclusion, *the integration* (Goodman, 2023).

**Economic integration** is measured through wages, occupational status, or labor market mobility. Research from the Netherlands shows a positive effect of citizenship on employment (Peters et al. 2018), even that the probability of employment increases leading up to citizenship "anticipating naturalization".

**Political integration** is measured by participation, efficacy, and political knowledge. However, this should not to be confused with legal integration, which is formal status acquisition, though naturalization is certainly a political process, since we know these are distinct because evidence from both the United States (Bueker, 2021) and France (Carrillo, 2015) shows that the desire to participate politically is often what motivates immigrants to naturalize.

**Social integration** is a broad category that may range from connection to the national group, to social contacts, and to language proficiency, the latter of which has been shown in the German case to positively influence national identification (Hochman & Davidov, 2014). This mixed picture reflects the soft side of citizenship as membership in a political community, where one may be a member by law but not in practice. For instance, Ersanilli & Koopmans (2010) found that "naturalization is positively associated with socio-cultural integration only in those countries like France and Germany that have traditionally required a certain degree of cultural assimilation from their new citizens," a finding corroborated by evidence from the early-twentieth-century United States (Fouka, 2019).

Migration is a natural phenomenon in the history of mankind. Throughout centuries, people have been on the move within Europe as well as to and from Europe. This has been important for the progress and benefit of each individual and society as a whole. The European Union (EU) has received wide public support by overcoming national borders as dividing lines, creating an area of free movement of persons and even lifting border controls under the Schengen Agreement. Integration of migrants has therefore become a cornerstone of building stable and prosperous societies and nations. Thus, failures in the refugee integration lead to human suffering, fractured societies with social, economic and political instability (Hajdukovic, 2023).

Within the immigration process; there is a distinction between the *assimilation*, *integration*, and *inclusion* of migrants and refugees. *Assimilation* describes the process, in which migrants and refugees are the only ones that need to adapt to existing norms, behaviors, values and the culture of the host country and therefore become similar to the native majority. *Integration* on the other side is defined as a "two-way" street, where all members of society find common ground and make compromises but critics say that this is only theoretical and that the

burden is most often placed only on the refugees and migrants. *Inclusion* therefore implies that all members of the society have the opportunity to participate in social, cultural and political life and encourages a sense of togetherness.

The term “integration”, thus, was used in a broader way, which implies *inclusive participation coming from both sides, along the lines of the definition used by the UNHCR with regard to the integration of refugees: a dynamic and multi-faceted two-way process leading to full and equal membership in society*. This includes preparedness by refugee communities to adapt to host societies without giving up cultural identity, and the receiving communities and institutions equally ready to welcome refugees and meet the needs of a diverse population. Nevertheless, the process is complex and gradual, comprising legal, economic, social, and cultural dimensions (ibid 2023).

It’s interesting to note that the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the EU adopted two definitions sharing common features: the term *integration* would identify a dynamic process of mutual adaptation where both migrants and host societies bear some responsibilities in its fulfillment. This understanding of the concept has informed all the policies of the European Commission on the subject, including the recent *Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027* (ibid 2023).

The lack of integration of migrants and refugees does not only lead to social, economic, and psychological problems of the persons arriving in a new country, but also to the loss of income taxes and contributions to the pension and social security due to poor integration in the labor market. Furthermore, it leads to fragmented societies and political instability (ibid 2023).

In the past years, nations’ governments focused on the topics of migration and integration, but also the rising right-wing populists. By using dehumanizing and harmful narratives, they have increasingly influenced media, public discourse, and political movements. Rhetoric and policies which criminalize and dehumanize migrants and refugees leave them without a place in society.

That is why it is essential to ensure successful integration of migrants and refugees in all Council of Europe member States and to focus on the benefits to all parties involved in that process. The assimilationist approach to integration policy has been widely criticized, *given that it would annihilate (crush, conquer) the identities of minorities such as native citizens or minority immigrants* (ibid, 2023).

Finally, *multiculturalism* is sometimes cited as an approach to integration as opposed to assimilation. It promotes the integration of migrants in society, while advocating the preservation of their cultural identities. This approach has been criticized because it would encourage migrants’ segregation rather than fostering the cohesion among different communities in society (ibid, 2023).

### 2.2.3. Naturalization

Naturalization, “to make natural”, is not just the political transformation of an immigrant into a citizen, whereby they are a legal equal of a native-born citizen. It is also, theoretically, a social transformation from a national outsider to insider. Naturalization can mean crossing a soft boundary, in which citizenship represents not only full legal status that binds immigrants to the state, but also an identity connoting belonging to or assimilation in the national group.

It is citizenship as group belonging and not, to invoke a second meaning of “soft,” as a set of weak or informal citizenship practices. As a group membership, citizenship establishes both vertical ties to the polity and horizontal ties to other members of the national political community (Goodman & Wright 2015).

Naturalization does not merely assign membership; it can be a process of immigrant integration. As an instrument of integration, it might produce a citizen who resembles native-born citizens on a variety of outcomes, including economic, cultural and social measures (ibid,2015). The philosophy behind the concept of civic integration, a term which also refers to a set of policies that require immigrants to demonstrate country knowledge and language proficiency as part of the naturalization process (Goodman, 2014), is that an immigrant can thrive and function independently like native-born citizens.

By making this knowledge and proficiency a requirement of citizenship (and sometimes permanent settlement and even entry), European states are also prioritizing and formalizing steps of immigrant integration as a precondition for status acquisition. The past two decades have been described as a prolific era for new, formal language requirements in Europe as part of a twenty-first-century, assimilationist turn and rejection of



multiculturalism (Brubaker, 2001). A global comparative perspective also reveals this policy innovation in context, wherein formalized European practices align with those of immigrant-receiving states like the United States, Canada, and Australia but are quite distinct from global practices (Goodman, 2023).

All African countries permit, in principle, the acquisition of nationality by naturalization on the basis of long-term residence and the fulfillment of other conditions. In practice, however, obtaining nationality by naturalization can be very difficult, and in many countries is highly discretionary, excluded from all review by the courts or requirement to give reasons for refusal (Manby, 2016).

According to Manby (2016) more than 20 countries provide for a right to naturalize based on legal residence of five years; but Chad, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Uganda require 15 or 20 years, and the Central African Republic requires as many as 35 years. South Africa provides a two-step process: a person must first become a permanent resident, a process which takes a minimum of five years; following acquisition of permanent residence, a further five years' residence is required to become a citizen (ibid 2016). Requirements are added by some countries based on cultural assimilation, mainly knowledge of the national language(s) is so important. Ethiopia's 2003 Proclamation on Ethiopian Nationality requires the ability to "communicate in any one of the languages of the nations/nationalities of the Country" (Zecharias Fassil, 2020).

Egypt also requires an applicant for naturalization to "be knowledgeable in Arabic" as well. Botswana also requires knowledge of Setswana or another language spoken by a "tribal community" in Botswana. Similarly, Ghana also requires knowledge of an indigenous Ghanaian language; and other countries have similar requirements as well (Manby, 2016).

There is a clear movement in some other countries towards allowing for the acquisition of nationality by refugees. South Africa's law does, notably, provide for a transfer of status from refugee to permanent resident to naturalized citizen, though problems are reported in this process in practice (ibid, 2013). Tanzania has made provision for long-term refugees from Rwanda, Burundi and Somalia to become citizens. The most effective implementation of states' obligations under international refugee law to facilitate national integration of refugees is by those states where refugees have access to the general naturalization law is liberal, with only a short period of permanent residence required for naturalization and a functioning system to implement this rule. Nonetheless, too often, these procedures are inaccessible in practice even if they are available on the law paper (ibid, 2013).

Having said the above conceptual, theoretical, and empirical evidences, this article tries to highlight and unveil the existing of contested nationality/citizenship through an informal naturalization process in Gambella region of Ethiopia.

### **3. Methodological Approach**

This review article focused on the contested citizenship in Gambella region, Ethiopia. The study used qualitative research approach through document analysis of the existing secondary data such as conceptual, theoretical and empirical literature reviews.

Qualitative research approach is a method employed to delve into and understand the significance attributed by individuals or groups to social or human issues. This approach involves exploring, evolving, inquiries and procedures that culminates into a flexible and tailored final report structure via inductive inquiry methodology, focus on personal perspectives, and commitment to capturing the intricate nuances of a particular scenario (Creswell, 2018).

Document analysis is a qualitative research technique. It involves evaluating electronic and physical documents to interpret them, gain an understanding of their meaning and develop upon the information they provide (Creswell, 2014). In this review article, the secondary data was analyzed using a document analysis through narrations and descriptions after identifying patterns in the data, extracting useful information and determining how it applies to the questions around which the review study centered.

### **4. Discussion**

#### **4.1. Contested Citizenship: The Legitimacy of Belongingness**

According to Regassa (2010), Sudan was engulfed in a devastating civil war with the South since 1995 (except the short period of 11 years from 1972-1983) which considerably affected the frontier regions. Similarly, for almost the past seventy (70) years, Gambella region of Ethiopia has been hosting several hundred thousands of

refugees fleeing from the civil war in Sudan since 1955. This is clear evidence that the region could be overwhelmed by the South Sudanese refugees.

By the 1980s, Ethiopia's policy towards refugees had shifted towards encampment, with services and support provided in fixed locations and refugees' freedom of movement theoretically was limited to camps. However, such an approach was premised on being able to distinguish clearly between refugees and local peoples, something that has rarely been possible in Gambella, particularly among populations that speak the same language. At that time, there was no attempt made by the Ethiopian government to address the issue of refugees to acquire citizenship through naturalization.

This occurred due to the fact that many refugees become Ethiopian citizens through their kinships, as majority have integrated themselves into host communities informally and illegally as well. So determining who is citizen and who is not has been question for decades, and citizenship status has been use as a mean by some politicians to gain larger share in resources in the regional government. Carver, Fana, and Naish (2020) also stated that refugees had been woven into the politics of the Gambella region as many South Sudanese refugees had joined the regional civil service informal through their kinships who are citizens of Ethiopia.

This was similar with the finding of Hunter (2016), who stated that there had been new forms of contested citizenship resonated in some other African countries. In Ethiopia context, the contestation of citizenship along ethnic lines is both a manifestation and aggravating factors of the festering legitimacy crisis that has been eroding in Gambella region. This shows that the process of restructuring Ethiopia into federation has heightened ethnic competition among various ethnic groups.

Given the primacy of ethnicity in the structuring of Ethiopia, it was only to be expected that ethnic mobilization including refugees for inclusion or integration is a major part of the new politics of citizen movements that arose to renegotiate solidarity or belongingness, this even led to a large number of South Sudanese refugees to join many Ethiopia institutions including Ethiopia National Defense Force and Federal Police. The controversy surrounding the citizenship exemplifies the challenges to the Gambella region's refugee administration and integration program, as it is very difficult to differentiate who is a South Sudanese refugee and who is not.

#### **4.2. The Role of Ethnicity in Facilitating Informal Integration of Refugees to Acquire Ethiopian Citizenship**

The fact that ethnicity is constructed and involves in mobilization of collective identity/security in making political demands should not be surprised that it is a major basis of contested citizenship. It is by no means the only basis for contestation (race, gender, religion, class, and so on are other important bases) of citizenship. However, it is arguably the most potent challenge to national or universal citizenship in Africa (Horowitz, 2000).

The first reason is that ethnicity hinges on and is sustained by territory-based exclusivist and discriminatory claims. As such, it is antithetical to citizenship, which is a more egalitarian concept that assumes the formal equality of citizens across territorial boundaries within the state. The territoriality of ethnic claims makes it possible for people from outside groups to be denied citizenship rights within the same country. Perhaps the best example for this is to be found in Ethiopia since 1991, where regionalism has historically involved the preclusion of so-called non-indigenes (also called migrants or settlers) from citizenship rights in their places of domicile. The stratification and inequality of ethnic groups, coupled with the fact that ethnicity thrives on competition, make politicized ethnicity dangerous for citizenship.

Ethnicity is a powerful ideology for mobilization, especially in cases where there is discrimination against members of the group by the state. Its intricate linkages to, and reinforcement by, other emotive constructs like religion and territoriality make it even more powerful. Donald Horowitz explains the strong appeal of ethnicity in terms of the fact that "group worth" is a focal point of both individual and group identity because self-worth or self-esteem tends to be calculated in terms of the esteem accorded the individual's group (*ibid*, 2000).

In the literature, Mozaffar offers a relatively good articulation of what politicization of ethnic identity entails. He observes that politicization of ethnic identity is a strategically rational behavior involving the contingent (as opposed to the reflexive) activation of objective ethnic markers by political elites to form groups, define group interests, and organize collective action to advance political goals (Mozaffar,1995).

This was what some politicians did by requested the federal government to bestow citizenship titles to refugee and endorse the territorial claims of Gambella Region (Samuel, 2021). It should be noted that dual citizen is not allowed in Ethiopia, the option of taking this nationality lies in the hands of the 'awardee'. However, the law is

silent on whether this award can be claimed after remaining dormant for some time or if there is a specific time period for reacting to the conferring of nationality.

Although the nation-states in Africa have clearly demarcated borders that were imposed by colonial authorities, it faces the challenge of controlling their borders (Aniche, Moyo and Nshimbi, 2021). Ethiopia is not exception; this situation has negative ramifications for the country, and has a positive side for refugees and their kin host communities at the border areas. On the one hand, the state's limited presence in borders areas have security implications exemplified by trans-border criminal activities such as human trafficking, smuggling of small arms, and cross borders attacks (*ibid*,2021). On the other hand, the laxity in enforcement of borders control measures provides a space within which informality thrives. The informality of this situation enables refugees to sidestep host countries' stringent refugee policies by relying on social relationships with host communities that do not always conform to the official refugee policy.

The situation in Gambella Region, echoes a similar cases of informal integration along border regions exemplified by the experiences of Angolan refugees in Zambia (Hansen, 1981) Mozambican refugees in eastern and northeastern Zimbabwe, and the Shona people who straddle the Mozambique-Zimbabwe border and who move back and forth across the border are described as "artificial" (Daimon, 2016).

This informality makes it easier for refugees to acquire citizenship in defiance of the official refugee policy because most of the border regions are occupied by co-ethnics who live on both sides of the border areas such that refugee camps are often established in areas that have a history of trans-border kinship, marriage, religious, business, and even political relationships.

Ethnic similarity along the period of interaction and exchange has contributed to positive relations between refugees and hosts in the Somali region of Ethiopia (Vemuru et al, 2020). However, the massive influxes of refugees into Gambella Region of Ethiopia with the historical and cultural connections among the ethnicities had become a means of acquiring the host country citizenship.

This implies that the law and the formal processes within which to acquire citizenship in the border regions, like Gambella, that host refugees is not implemented in the way it was adopted, as it was adopted through the extralegal social relationships among the similar ethnic groups, in Ethiopia. Though there are very limited empirical researches in the area of study, the informal process of acquisition of Ethiopian citizenship by the refugees and the politics of assimilation had enabled the actors to "operate outside the rules," (Moore, 2000). However, the traditional Ethiopian notion of citizenship which states that "no matter where you are born, you are the son or daughter of the original soil/land or homeland of the parent through whom you trace your descent is now being deteriorated and highly affected by the informal process of acquisition of Ethiopian citizenship by refugees and the politics of assimilation in Gambella region.

Citizenship is constructed on an ethnic basis. Perhaps the best illustration of this is the clause in the Ethiopian 1995 constitution, Article 8, which states that all sovereign power resides in the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia. In this case, the term Nations, Nationalities and Peoples makes the individual as a citizen whose rights are tied to those of the ethnic groups (FDRC Constitution, 1995).

#### **4.2. The Implications of Informal Integration of Refugees in Gambella Region of Ethiopia**

The implications of informal integration of refugees for the Gambellans future are significant; with scholars and policymakers alike are expressing concern about the impact of continued polarization and division on the region long-term stability and development. One major concern is that informal integration of refugees will continue to fuel violence and conflict, particularly in the region, where ethnic tensions are high (Samuel, 2021).

With the influx of refugees in large number, one of the most contentious issues is the politics of numbers that has locked two of the region's major ethnic groups, the Anywaa and the Nuer, into conflict. Both have a cross-border settlement in South Sudan as well. Until the mid-1980s the Anywaa constituted the majority of Gambella's population. However, with the massive influx of refugees since the outbreak of the second Sudanese civil war in 1983 and 2013 South Sudan war have dramatically changed the region's demography (Meckelburg, 2007). The local communities, who advance a historical argument for political entitlement over the region, contest the census, arguing that some communities are not Ethiopian citizens. The increasing number of refugee population is giving the Ethiopian Nuer community advantage to dominate the political positions and, leaving the other communities to feel a minority (Dereje, 2014).



Another concern is that identity politics has hindered the region's ability to address pressing social and economic challenges, such as poverty, corruption, and underdevelopment. As Dereje (2011) notes, "the preoccupation with identity has often undermined the pursuit of development, as resources are channeled towards satisfying the demands of specific groups rather than towards the broader goal of regional progress." Therefore, South Sudanese refugees have played a significant role in shaping the political landscape, with various groups using it to advance their interests.

The implications of refugees for the region's future are vast and varied. On the one hand, it could foster a sense of inclusivity and diversity, where people are allowed to express their cultural identities without fear of discrimination. On the other hand, it could lead to the balkanization of the region, where ethnic groups retreat into their enclaves, leading to a fractured society.

This could lead to further conflicts, as groups struggle to assert their dominance and protect their interests. Furthermore, informal integration of refugees has hindered development of the region by creating a situation where meritocracy is sacrificed in favor of identity-based quotas. This has led to a situation where individuals are appointed to positions based on their identity, rather than their qualifications, leading to a lack of expertise and competence in key positions. This, in turn, leads to a decline in the quality of governance and public services.

## 5. Conclusion

The question of who is a citizen and who is not is often fundamental in multi-ethnic states or multinational states, for that matter. In multinational states like Ethiopia, the possession of citizenship can mean different things to different groups, including political power and the ability to enjoy the rights of citizens, such as the right to residence, the right to work, owning property, owning land, acquiring education, being married, and so on, as well as the duties of citizens. In such countries, one of the important pillars of the existence of stable polities is a broad consensus on citizenship for all these highly divided societies.

Multi-ethnic societies need some form of consensus over the question of who belongs to which ethnic group, and in particular, who is a citizen with access to full political, economic, social, and civic rights. The construction and transformation of these boundaries have consequences for the consolidation of multiculturalism and the stability of the polity. Many hybrid societies like Ethiopia, where citizenship and ethnic membership are seriously intertwined, encounter problems regarding who could be a citizen of the country and how non-citizens constrained to live within the *de facto* national boundary of the country was legislatively accommodated to enjoy their individual and collective rights.

The complex nature of the citizenship question varies accordingly in many countries. With regards to the people of Gambella region, the situation presents itself with the fact that host and refugees shared so many similarities in terms of kin and cultures. The law and the formal processes within which the law is implemented are mediated by the extralegal social relations and politics that enable the actors involved to "operate outside the rules, to use rules, or abandon them, bend them, reinterpret them, side-step them, or replace them".

It is known that Africa's borders are demarcated by colonial powers that posed a serious challenge of controlling border areas and make the presence of state felt invisible. This problem coupled with the lack of enforcing the supreme law of the land created a condition for the informality to thrive. Therefore, informality makes it easier for refugees to gain citizenship. This informal process of acquiring citizenship raised questions of loyalty and some local people even contested the citizenship of other communities.

In view of these findings, this article recommends policy that build on shared needs and interests between the refugees and host communities, strengthen institutions to tighten law that regulate refugees and create a situation to facilitate the formal naturalization of refugees according to the country constitution.

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