

Research Article

Bridging Worlds: Mechanisms for Integrating Indigenous Knowledge into the Ethiopian Parliament's Governance Functions

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Abstract

Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) are deeply woven into the social fabric of Ethiopia, representing generations of accumulated wisdom in areas such as traditional governance, sustainable agriculture, herbal medicine, and cultural practices. These systems often form the basis of social order and problem-solving at the community level. However, the country's formal legislative institutions - the bicameral Federal Parliamentary Assembly, comprising the House of Peoples' Representatives (HoPR) and the House of the Federation (HoF), primarily operate within a framework largely inspired by Western legal and parliamentary traditions. This modern structure has not yet systematically or effectively incorporated indigenous worldviews, knowledge, or traditional governance practices into national lawmaking. This disconnect can lead to policies that are detached from local realities and undermine the legitimacy felt by citizens towards formal state institutions, as reflected in public trust surveys. This article reviews Ethiopia's diverse indigenous knowledge systems, including prominent examples like the Oromo Gada system, and examines the current structure and legal framework of the Ethiopian Parliament concerning cultural diversity and indigenous participation. It identifies the critical institutional gaps, linguistic barriers, and trust deficits hindering the meaningful integration of indigenous knowledge into parliamentary processes and legislation. Drawing on a qualitative methodology involving a comprehensive review of existing academic literature, policy documents, constitutional and legal texts, and comparative case studies from both Ethiopian traditional systems and international examples (such as Bolivia and South Africa), the study proposes theoretical and practical mechanisms for bridging these two distinct worlds of governance. We argue that approaches grounded in legal pluralism, the establishment of dedicated consultative councils representing traditional authorities, the creation of specialized parliamentary committees focused on indigenous affairs, and reforms to ensure dedicated representation for indigenous knowledge-bearers can significantly enable the systematic inclusion of local knowledge and perspectives in national governance processes. Finally, the article outlines specific constitutional, legal, and policy reforms necessary for implementation and provides clear, actionable recommendations directed towards Ethiopian lawmakers, civil society organizations, and scholars. The overarching goal is to facilitate the formal recognition, institutionalization, and harnessing of indigenous wisdom within Ethiopia's parliamentary framework to foster governance that is more inclusive, culturally resonant, legitimate, and effective in serving all its diverse peoples.

Keywords

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), Parliamentary Governance, Ethiopia, Legal Pluralism, Traditional Governance, Political Representation, Gada System, Constitutional Reform

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1. Introduction

Ethiopia is a highly diverse, multi-ethnic nation with a rich tapestry of cultural and knowledge traditions. It is “endowed with hundreds and thousands of tangible and intangible cultural heritages,” each carrying generations of locally-crafted knowledge about social organization, natural resource management, health, and spirituality [1]. Indigenous knowledge - understood as the “ways of knowing, seeing and thinking that are passed down orally from generation to generation” within a community (Warren, 1995, as cited in Kebede & Belay, 2017) [2] - underpins much of rural Ethiopian life. The global significance of Indigenous rights and knowledge systems is increasingly recognized, though often within contexts of ongoing colonial legacies and the challenge of survival [3]. As Stavenhagen [3] notes, “For most IPs [Indigenous Peoples], survival is the major challenge in a world that has systematically denied them the means and thus the right to existence as such” [3].

In Ethiopia, long-standing systems regulate community conflict resolution, land use, and social order (e.g., the Oromo *Gada system* [4], Gurage *Yejoka Qicha* [5], various elders’ councils, etc.). These bodies historically “regulate the political, economic, social and religious activity” of their peoples, enforce moral conduct, and build social cohesion [2]. At the same time, the modern Ethiopian state - founded on a 1995 constitution [6] - built a federal parliamentary system largely modeled on Western legislatures. This system currently provides for universal suffrage elections to the 547-member House of Peoples’ Representatives (HoPR) and an 112-member House of the Federation (HoF) representing Ethiopia’s nations, nationalities and peoples [7]. Despite constitutional provisions for linguistic and cultural rights (e.g. “all Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state recognition” [6]), in practice the legislature’s processes and lawmaking remain largely detached from local knowledge traditions. This mirrors challenges in other nations where Indigenous peoples strive for self-government and recognition of their distinct political and legal orders, which often predate the nation-state [8].

This disconnect has tangible consequences. Survey data show Ethiopians deeply trust and rely on traditional leaders: second only to religious figures, traditional elders are more trusted than the Prime Minister or national legislators [9]. However, citizens simultaneously express a desire to keep elders “out of politics,” indicating that people value local wisdom but perceive formal politics as separate [9]. This paradox underscores the gap: the legitimacy and knowledge residing in local systems are not formally integrated into national governance, even as many Ethiopians feel that indigenous bodies govern their communities more effectively than elected officials do. As one observer noted, rural communities use customary dispute resolution consistently, and citizens feel traditional leaders “do a better job of listening to their constituents” than members of the HoPR [9]. The chal-

lenge, as Nakata [10] explores in the Australian context, often revolves around how the “self” in Indigenous self-determination is defined and recognized by the state, and “what forms of policy and governance can legitimately be enacted over Indigenous peoples by the colonial state” [10].

1.1. Research Question and Objectives

In this context, the present article seeks to answer the central research question: How can Ethiopia’s formal legislative system be reformed to meaningfully integrate indigenous knowledge and governance practices, thereby enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of its parliamentary functions? To address this question, the article pursues the following objectives:

- 1) To review Ethiopia’s diverse indigenous knowledge systems and their socio-cultural relevance.
- 2) To examine the current structure and legal framework of the Ethiopian Parliament concerning cultural diversity and indigenous participation.
- 3) To identify the institutional gaps and challenges hindering the integration of indigenous knowledge into parliamentary processes.
- 4) To propose theoretical and practical mechanisms, drawing on Ethiopian and international examples, for bridging indigenous knowledge systems with formal legislative governance.
- 5) To formulate concrete policy recommendations for constitutional, legal, and institutional reforms aimed at fostering this integration.

1.2. Methodology

This article employs a qualitative research methodology, primarily relying on a comprehensive review of existing academic and policy literature, constitutional and legal documents, and reports from governmental and non-governmental organizations. It utilizes a descriptive and analytical approach to examine Ethiopia’s indigenous knowledge systems and parliamentary framework. Furthermore, a comparative case study method is adopted, drawing insights from both Ethiopian traditional systems (e.g., *Gada* [4], *Yejoka* [5]) and international precedents (e.g., Bolivia [18], South Africa, Australia [8], Canada [15]) to identify transferable mechanisms for integration. The analysis is grounded in existing scholarly works (e.g., Kebede & Belay, 2017 [2]; Bitew et al., 2021 [5]; Aliye, 2020 [13]), government texts [6], and, where available, Indigenous-led sources and perspectives found in the supplementary literature.

1.3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework underpinning this study posits a dialectical relationship between Indigenous Knowledge

Systems (IKS) and Formal Legislative Systems (FLS). It views these ‘two worlds’ not as inherently incompatible, but as systems that can be synergistically linked through appropriate ‘bridging mechanisms.’ These mechanisms (e.g., legal pluralism, dedicated representation, consultative bodies) are theorized to facilitate a two-way flow of knowledge and legitimacy, ultimately leading to more inclusive, effective, and culturally resonant governance. Borrini-Feyerabend and Hill [11] distinguish between governance (who decides, how decisions are made, who holds power and authority) and management (what is done to achieve objectives) [11]. This article focuses on the governance aspects of integrating IKS. The framework draws on theories of legal pluralism, participatory governance, and indigenous rights [3, 12] to explore how formal institutions can recognize, respect, and incorporate indigenous wisdom to enhance democratic processes and societal well-being.

Our goal is to inform lawmakers, civil society, and scholars of clear pathways by which Ethiopia can reform its constitutional and legislative processes to honor and harness indigenous knowledge, in accordance with the values of its own constitution [6] and global human-rights norms on indigenous participation, such as those outlined in the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)* [12]. The article proceeds by (1) an overview of Ethiopia’s indigenous knowledge systems and their cultural significance; (2) an examination of the current parliamentary framework and legal provisions; (3) an identification of gaps and institutional challenges; and (4) proposals for theoretical and practical mechanisms to bridge the two realms, further illustrated with case studies.

2. Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Ethiopia

2.1. Definitions and Scope

In the Ethiopian context, indigenous knowledge is often synonymous with traditional practices, oral traditions, and communal norms that have been “practiced traditionally” for generations [2]. Scholars define it broadly as the unique body of information and methods acquired by local people through long-term experience with their environment (Warren, 1995, as cited in Kebede Belay, 2017) [2]. It encompasses agricultural and pastoral techniques, medicinal knowledge of local flora, craft and architectural designs, folklore and education systems, conflict resolution methods, and cultural rituals. For example, one review highlights that Ethiopia is “very rich in different indigenous knowledge systems in areas such as architecture, medicine, agriculture, and cottage industry” [2]. Another survey of literature notes that indigenous knowledge has historically been central to community development and social order, even if under-researched by formal academics [2]. Davis [14] characterizes indigenous knowledge systems

more broadly, noting that they are often “interconnected with other elements of indigenous cultural systems,” and that “indigenous peoples have a vast knowledge of, and capacity for, developing innovative practices and products from their environments” [14]. Key features often include communal rights, a close interdependence between knowledge, land, and spirituality, oral transmission, and rules regarding secrecy and sacredness [14].

2.2. Examples of Governance Knowledge

Among the most politically salient indigenous systems in Ethiopia are customary governance structures that regulate society. The *Gada system* of the Oromo people is a preeminent example: it is recognized by UNESCO as an “indigenous democratic socio-political system” [4]. Under Gada, each Oromo community is organized into age-based grades or classes that rotate leadership every eight years [4]. The system has historically handled legislation, conflict resolution, moral codes, time reckoning, and ceremonies [4]. Aliye [13] provides an extensive synthesis of Gada leadership philosophy, highlighting its core principles:

- 1) Humanness (Namummaa): Guiding behavior through relational philosophy in interpersonal, community, and spiritual relations, emphasizing “harmony, empathy, dignity, respect, generosity” [13].
- 2) Freedom (Bilisa): Belief in individual and collective freedom, where people “don’t bend in front of anyone” (de Salviac, 2013, as cited in Aliye, 2020) [13].
- 3) Respect for Human Rights (Mirga namummaa kabajuu): Upholding individual and collective rights including freedom of speech, property, assembly, and political participation [13].
- 4) Equality (Kite): All members are considered equals irrespective of material possessions or power, with equal participation and shared responsibilities [13].
- 5) Morality (Safu): Conduct aligned with moral and ethical order and societal norms [13].
- 6) Peace (Nagaa): Central to all relationships, maintained through conciliation, mediation, and transformational approaches to conflict [13].
- 7) Sovereignty of People (Ol-aantummaa sabaa): People are the source of political power, electing leaders and managing affairs through them [13].
- 8) Accountability and Recall (Buqqisuu): Elected leaders are answerable and can be recalled, with midterm reviews and removal for misconduct [13].
- 9) Rule of Law (Ol-aantummaa seeraa): Traditional laws and deliberative, consensual law-making apply to all equally [13].
- 10) Separation of Powers and Checks and Balances (Aangoo qooddatanii wal too’achuu): Clear separation between general assembly, judiciary, and executive, with interdependent operation [13].
- 11) Decentralized Governance and Division of Power:

Federal structure with central, regional, and local tiers sharing devolved powers [13].

12) Fixed Terms of Office and Peaceful Transfer of Power: Single 8-year term with peaceful transition [13].

13) Participation and Engagement of Citizens: Guaranteed citizen participation in democratic self-rule at different levels [13].

14) Conflict Transformation: Proactive prevention and transformation of conflicts to positive peace through addressing root causes and restoring justice [13].

Similarly, the *Yejoka Qicha* system of the Gurage people (studied by Bitew et al., 2021) [5] illustrates another tradition of collective decision-making and justice within a community, including elements of accountability and communal consultation [5]. There are many other local councils and elder assemblies - often convened under a sacred tree or shrine - whose unwritten laws guide marriage, inheritance, and social disputes. These indigenous governance institutions embody rich repositories of law-like knowledge and community norms.

2.3. Cultural and Social Relevance

Indigenous knowledge in Ethiopia is not merely historical artifact; it remains socially important. People continue to use traditional environmental knowledge for farming and livestock management, especially in remote areas where modern services are scarce [1]. Practices like local seed conservation, community-based irrigation, and herbal medicine draw on centuries-old wisdom [2]. Likewise, customary conflict-resolution (often through elders' councils) is frequently preferred over formal courts for settling local disputes. Studies note that such practices strengthen social cohesion and leverage mutual respect; they are often faster, more cost-effective, and seen as more legitimate by locals than distant bureaucratic systems [2]. Indeed, the Afrobarometer survey underscores this trust: most Ethiopians identify traditional leaders as most capable of resolving local disputes and desire greater community governance [19]. Hanrahan [15] argues that such Indigenous values, even after centuries of colonial pressure, can form the "foundation of Indigenous governance today" [15], as seen in the *Mi'kmaq Rights Initiative* in Canada.

Yet despite this cultural centrality, much indigenous knowledge - especially the oral, unwritten kind - remains undocumented and under-theorized. Kebede and Belay [2] lament that Ethiopian scholarship on indigenous knowledge is in its infancy and often led by foreign researchers. Nonetheless, international bodies like UNESCO [4] and the UN have increasingly recognized the value of safeguarding and integrating these traditions for sustainable development and cultural rights. For instance, UNESCO's profile of the Gada system emphasizes that such indigenous governance arose "from knowledge gained over generations" and serves as a mechanism for community cohesion [4]. The notion that

knowing one's language, culture, and traditions is "the beginning of wisdom" reflects how elders in Ethiopia view indigenous knowledge - as the foundation for understanding and solving contemporary challenges [1].

In summary, Ethiopia's indigenous knowledge systems span a wide array of domains and remain socially influential [2, 1]. They represent accumulated experience in law, governance, and livelihood adapted to local environments. Preserving and applying this knowledge can offer context-specific solutions (e.g. in land management or conflict resolution) and affirm the dignity of Ethiopia's nations and peoples. The core challenge is to bring these knowledge systems into dialogue with the country's formal governance structures so that policies and laws benefit from this deep well of wisdom. As Borrini-Feyerabend and Hill [11] emphasize, governance for conservation of nature (and by extension, for societal well-being) requires understanding its "historical and cultural roots" [11].

3. Governance Framework of the Ethiopian Parliament

3.1. Structure of Parliament

Ethiopia's 1995 Constitution established a federal parliamentary republic with a bicameral legislature [6]. Article 53 explicitly provides: "There shall be two Federal Houses: The House of Peoples' Representatives and the House of the Federation" [6]. The House of Peoples' Representatives (HoPR) is the lower chamber. It is composed of members elected by popular vote in single-member districts for five-year terms. In practice, there are 547 constituencies nationwide, one deputy per constituency [7]. The HoPR has extensive legislative powers: it "shall have the power of legislation in all matters assigned by the Constitution to Federal jurisdiction," including natural resource management, commerce, transportation, and others [6]. Critically, Article 54(2) of the Constitution mandates "special representation for minority Nationalities and Peoples" in the HoPR, and actual law sets a cap of 550 seats with at least 20 reserved for minority nationalities [6]. The Prime Minister and Council of Ministers are drawn from the HoPR, making it the dominant body for executive leadership [6].

The House of the Federation (HoF) is the upper chamber, designed primarily as the voice of Ethiopia's Nations, Nationalities and Peoples. It has 112 members (as per current law) [7], each representing an ethnic group or region. By constitutional design, "each Nation, Nationality and People shall be represented... by at least one member," with additional seats apportioned per population [6]. These representatives are indirectly selected: State Councils (regional parliaments) elect or hold elections for these members [6]. The HoF's powers, as outlined in Article 62 [6], are mostly oversight and advisory in nature: it interprets the Constitution;

organizes the Council of Constitutional Inquiry; protects the rights of nations (including secession claims); “promote [s] the equality of the Peoples of Ethiopia” and their unity; resolves inter-state disputes; and decides on revenue-sharing, among others [6]. Notably, it also must “submit its budget for approval to the House of Peoples’ Representatives” and elects its own Speaker [6].

3.2. Language and Participation

The Ethiopian Constitution strongly affirms multiculturalism: Article 5 states unequivocally “all Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state recognition” [6]. In practice, this means that federal institutions could, in theory, conduct business in any of the country’s official or recognized languages. However, the reality is that parliamentary proceedings are overwhelmingly conducted in Amharic (with occasional English for official documentation). Other indigenous languages (Oromo, Somali, Tigrinya, etc.) are not routinely used in debates or committee work, limiting direct participation by non-Amharic speakers. There are mechanisms for translation - for example, parliamentary committee sessions sometimes use interpreters - but the dominance of Amharic creates a linguistic barrier for indigenous representation.

3.3. Special Provisions and Human Rights

The Constitution also provides for personal and cultural rights that touch on indigenous practices. Article 34 guarantees marriage and family rights and explicitly allows adjudication of personal/family law under customary or religious systems with the parties’ consent [6]. Article 9 declares the Constitution the supreme law: any “customary practice” or law contrary to it is void [6]. Thus, while Ethiopia recognizes customary laws in limited domains (family, inheritance) and affirms cultural rights (e.g. to develop one’s language and traditions [6]), it subordinates all to constitutional guarantees of equality and human rights. This sets the legal framework within which Parliament operates: it must respect cultural diversity (e.g., Article 39’s unconditional self-determination clause, language equality, etc. [6]) but also ensure no tradition violates core constitutional rights. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), particularly Article 31, which states that “Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions,” provides an international benchmark for these rights, even if not fully received into domestic law [12].

3.4. Institutional Gaps

While the Constitution creates a broad umbrella for diversity, it includes no explicit provision for integrating indigenous knowledge per se into lawmaking. The HoF’s role in promoting “unity” and equality among peoples [6] is not the same as incorporating elders’ wisdom into legislative debates.

Furthermore, there is no official parliamentary committee or advisory council tasked with indigenous knowledge or cultural affairs. Parliament’s internal regulations do allow some public hearings and expert testimony, but these have rarely involved indigenous elders or knowledge-holders. In sum, the formal structures respect Ethiopia’s multicultural identity through representation and language rights, but they stop short of bridging the gap between oral-traditional governance and written statutes.

4. Gaps and Challenges to Integration

Despite constitutional recognition of diversity, significant gaps remain in translating indigenous knowledge into parliamentary decision-making. We outline the main challenges below:

- 1) *Underrepresentation and Political Exclusion:* Indigenous peoples in Ethiopia often lack direct channels into the legislative process. Although minorities are “specially represented” in parliament [6], the mechanism (state-party nominations and plurality elections) has not ensured that indigenous knowledge-bearers themselves become legislators. In practice, parliamentary seats are filled by members of the dominant political party (currently the Prosperity Party) who may not have roots in or allegiance to specific indigenous communities. There are no reserved seats or quotas explicitly for traditional leaders or elders of ethnic communities beyond the general “20 seats for minority nationalities” [6]. Consequently, the expertise of indigenous councils and the Gada or similar systems seldom reaches national law-makers. This reflects a broader global issue where, as Stavenhagen [3] points out, Indigenous peoples often “claim the right to political representation as indigenous peoples, which may not always be compatible with existing political structures” [3].
- 2) *Language and Worldview Barriers:* As noted, Amharic’s dominance in Parliament sidelines speakers of other languages. This excludes not only lay participation (e.g. petitioners) but also indigenous MPs or experts who might wish to contribute. More subtly, the legislative process relies on written proposals, data and rational-legal arguments rooted in Western frameworks. Indigenous knowledge is often oral, contextual, and holistic [2]. Davis [14] notes the challenge: “The dispersal and dispossession of indigenous peoples as a result of colonisation has resulted in a significant loss of indigenous knowledge and practices. This makes it difficult to properly identify and document indigenous knowledge” [14]. Hanrahan [15] also highlights that early colonial agents “couldn’t understand Indigenous governance, Indigenous literacy, and other Indigenous systems and structures, so they minimized their importance, denied their existence, and/or held them against Indigenous peoples” [15]. Translating IKS into

formal policy language is difficult without careful mediation. Indigenous concepts of land stewardship or conflict resolution may not easily fit into statutory categories. Without dedicated translation of worldview and terms, parliamentary debate tends to ignore local epistemologies.

- 3) *Lack of Institutional Channels*: There is no standard mechanism for consulting indigenous authorities on bills that affect them. For example, when drafting land-use, natural resource or cultural heritage laws, Parliament typically relies on technical experts and bureaucrats, not elders or community representatives. Marks [17], critiquing Australian Indigenous policy, emphasizes that “Essentially what has been lacking is effective engagement with the communities and the opportunity for their meaningful participation” [17]. By contrast, some other countries legally require such consultation: e.g. South Africa’s Constitution (Article 72) mandates that any law affecting customary law or traditional communities must be referred to the National House of Traditional Leaders. Ethiopia has no equivalent obligation. The absence of a parliamentary committee on cultural or traditional affairs means that indigenous issues are often fragmented across different committees (e.g. agriculture, justice, etc.) with no unified advocacy.
- 4) *Legal Pluralism and Rights Concerns*: Ethiopia’s legal system technically allows customary adjudication only in limited spheres (family law) [6]. Customary practices that conflict with constitutional rights (gender equal-

ity, for example) are invalid under Article 9 [6]. This tension means that many traditional solutions (which may be patriarchal or age-hierarchical) cannot be adopted wholesale into state policy without reform. The 1995 Constitution thus creates a form of legal pluralism but with strong primacy of modern law. Some legal scholars argue that “religious and customary courts... often exceed” the boundaries intended by the constitution, and that Ethiopia’s legal framework remains a hybrid where informal systems operate in “grey areas”. Parliament must navigate these complexities: it cannot simply endorse indigenous norms that violate basic rights, yet it also lacks clarity on which aspects of customary law to formally recognize or how to integrate them with national statutes.

Perception and Trust Gaps: Although Afrobarometer [9] finds that citizens trust traditional leaders, many also want them to “stay out of politics” [9]. As illustrated in Figure 1, survey data show Ethiopians deeply trust and rely on traditional leaders: second only to religious figures, traditional elders are more trusted than the Prime Minister or national legislators [9]. This suggests a perceived incompatibility between the communal, consensus-based nature of indigenous governance and the partisan, adversarial nature of modern politics. Parliamentarians, often career politicians, may view traditional institutions as irrelevant or even threatening to state authority. Conversely, community elders may distrust state institutions as alien or self-serving. This mutual mistrust is a barrier: even if formal mechanisms were created, both sides would need confidence building to work together.

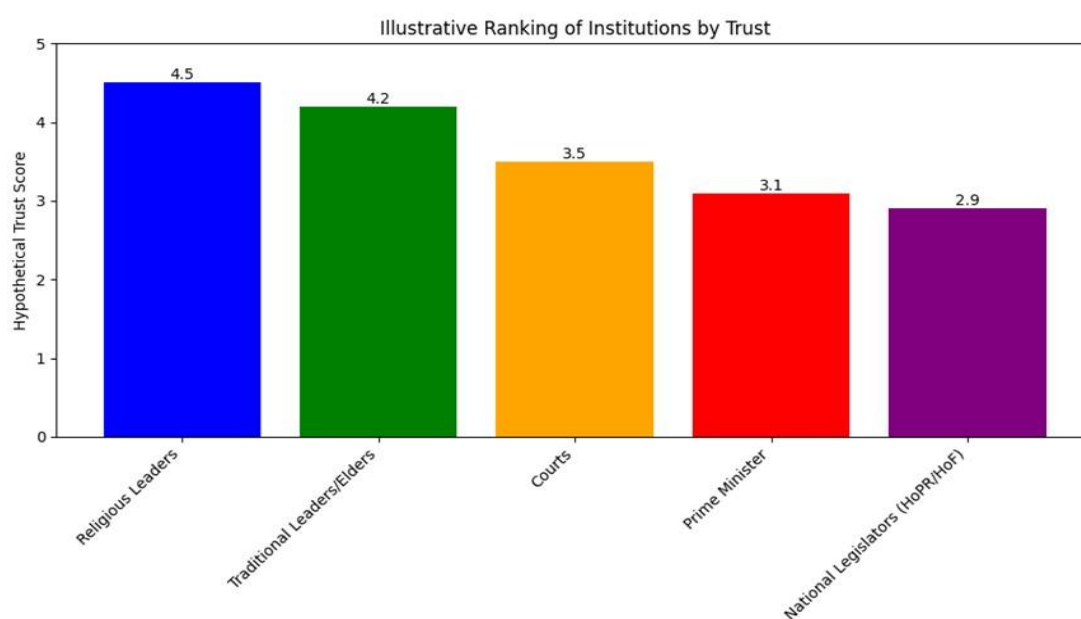


Figure 1. Rank of institutions by Trust.

Overall, the challenge is to create paths for mutual recognition: for the formal state to respect and learn from indige-

nous knowledge, and for indigenous communities to see value in engaging with national legislation. Any bridging mechanism must account for constitutional constraints (especially on rights and legal hierarchy [6]), political realities (major party dominance, ethnic federalism), and practical hurdles (language, documentation). The following section discusses theoretical approaches and institutional innovations that could address these gaps.

5. Mechanisms for Bridging Indigenous and Formal Legislative Systems

To integrate indigenous knowledge into legislative governance, several theoretical frameworks and institutional tools can be considered. Prominent among these are legal pluralism, representation and participation reforms, traditional councils or advisory bodies, and consultative and legislative procedures. We discuss each below, drawing on comparative insights.

5.1. Legal Pluralism and Customary Law Recognition

Legal pluralism recognizes that multiple systems of law or governance coexist within a state. In Ethiopia, legal pluralism is partly enshrined: for instance, Article 34(5) allows family and personal disputes to be adjudicated under customary or religious laws with consent [6]. This creates a limited space for indigenous norms in formal law. A more expansive approach would systematically acknowledge certain customary laws or knowledge as valid sources for legislation. For example, the Parliament could enact a *Customary Justice Act* that defines where and how customary norms apply (beyond family law) and how they interface with statutory law. Such an act might require courts to consider traditional conflict-resolution outcomes as guidance, as long as constitutional rights are upheld [6]. Vivian et al. [8] argue that the Australian state often fails to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' status as distinct political collectives or recognize their inherent rights to self-governance, despite co-existing legal orders [8]. Ethiopia can learn from such contexts by proactively defining spaces for customary law.

Comparative precedents illustrate possibilities: Bolivia's 2009 constitution, for instance, officially recognized *comunidades indígenas* and even reserves seats for indigenous communities in its legislature [18]. It also validated "community justice" practices (with the caveat they not violate national law) [18]. Similarly, South Africa's new constitution explicitly states that customary law is valid except where inconsistent with the Bill of Rights, and even provides that courts of traditional leaders exist. Ethiopia's own constitution could be amended to include a provision like these, formally valuing customary governance. Practically, however, incor-

poration would require mapping indigenous laws (a major research task, as highlighted by Kebede & Belay, 2017) [2] and ensuring they meet human rights standards. Yet a step in this direction could be to create a parliamentary legal library that collects traditional by-laws from various ethnic groups, making them available as reference for legislators.

5.2. Dedicated Representation and Quotas

Another mechanism is to adjust parliamentary representation to ensure indigenous voices. For example, electoral or party laws could reserve seats or quotas for certain ethnic groups or for non-partisan indigenous delegates. The Inter-Parliamentary Union notes that reserved seats can guarantee parliamentary presence: some countries assign a set number of seats to minorities irrespective of election outcomes [16]. While Ethiopia already guarantees a minimum of 20 seats for "minority nationalities" in HoPR [6], these seats are typically contested by political parties, not guaranteed to community-elected representatives. A possible reform could be to designate a few seats for elders or leaders chosen by indigenous communities themselves, similarly to how one might reserve seats for women or youth. Alternatively, electoral law could permit (or exempt from thresholds) lists of candidates based on ethnic communities, increasing the chance that smaller nationalities gain direct representation.

Such measures have precedents. Croatia allows minority groups exceeding 1.5% of the population to elect reserved representatives [16]. In Latin America, Bolivia's new system guarantees a number of Congress seats for indigenous citizens [18]. In Asia-Pacific, countries like Philippines and New Zealand have Maori reserved seats [16]. For Ethiopia, a targeted quota system (even just 1-2 dedicated seats for traditional council representatives per major ethnic group) could provide formal footholds for indigenous knowledge in Parliament. Care would be needed to define who qualifies as an "indigenous representative" - perhaps requiring selection by recognized cultural councils or by local referendum. Nakata [10] critically examines how Indigenous identity is often defined and policed by state mechanisms for policy purposes in Australia, urging a move beyond simple categorization to hear the "many voices" of Indigenous peoples [10]. This cautionary perspective is vital when designing representation systems.

5.3. Traditional Councils and Advisory Bodies

Beyond elected representation, formalizing traditional councils as consultative bodies is promising. For example, South Africa's Parliament refers bills concerning cultural customs to a National House of Traditional Leaders. Ethiopia could institute a similar National Council of Elders or House of Traditional Authorities, composed of respected local leaders from each major ethnic group. Such a council would not make laws, but would advise Parliament on culturally rele-

vant issues (e.g. land policy, cultural heritage laws, environmental regulations affecting indigenous practices). The council's recommendations would be non-binding but carry moral and political weight. This bridges the divide: elders have a designated forum to share their perspectives, and legislators have a direct line to indigenous expertise. Adjei [12] discusses the Australian proposal for a National Indigenous Arts and Cultural Authority (NIACA), which would be an advocacy body ensuring protection of Indigenous arts and culture, rooted in UNDRIP Article 31 [12]. Such a model could inform the creation of an Ethiopian Elders' Council.

Ethiopia has analogues to learn from. In 2020, an NGO-supported "Elders' Advisory Council" (*Ye Hager Shimaglewoch Amakari*) brought together traditional leaders nationwide to advise policy. Building on such initiatives, the government could formalize a council via statute or parliamentary rule. The council's mandate might mirror parts of the HoF's promoting unity clause [6], but operationally focus on evidence-gathering and consultation for legislation. Membership should be rotational, inclusive of men and women elders as per tradition, and may include experts in indigenous knowledge. Parliamentary committees could be required to invite this council when considering relevant bills, institutionalizing a two-way dialogue.

5.4. Parliamentary Committees and Procedures

Internal parliamentary reforms can also enhance integration. Establishing a Parliamentary Committee on Indigenous Affairs or expanding an existing committee's remit could concentrate attention on traditional knowledge in lawmaking. Such a committee would monitor legislation for cultural impacts, hold public hearings in local communities, and draft guidelines on engaging elders. The IPU notes that creating parliamentary commissions dedicated to minority issues helps build expertise even among non-indigenous deputies [16]. For instance, Ethiopia's HoF already has a "Committee for Regional & Constitutional Affairs," but it does not explicitly cover indigenous customs. Adding subcommittees or research units on traditional governance and knowledge within Parliament would institutionalize cross-system understanding.

In addition, procedural rules could require consultation obligations. If a proposed law pertains to customary land, pastoralism, or heritage, the bill could legally mandate stakeholder consultations with affected communities. This might take the form of mandatory public hearings in relevant regions, or sending drafts to local elders' associations for comment. Such obligations are used in some countries: aside from South Africa's case, international norms (e.g. ILO Convention 169) endorse consulting indigenous peoples on laws affecting them. Marks [17] underscores the importance of "free, prior and informed consent" as an international law bedrock for good governance concerning Indigenous peoples, noting its potential application beyond administrative acts to

the legislative process itself [17]. Ethiopia could enact parliamentary regulations or amend legislative drafting laws to require documented consultation outcomes be submitted with the bill.

5.5. Cross-cultural Training and Language Access

Finally, soft mechanisms can improve legislators' openness to indigenous knowledge. Parliament can organize orientation programs on Ethiopia's ethnic traditions and invite indigenous scholars or elders as lecturers. It can celebrate cultural events (e.g. hosting an annual symposium on indigenous knowledge around the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples). Critically, parliament should fully implement the constitutional guarantee of language equality by providing simultaneous interpretation (not just summaries) for all federal languages in sessions and committee meetings [6]. Allowing MPs and witnesses to speak in their mother tongue without penalty would lower barriers to expression. In South Africa, minority representatives are expressly permitted to use their languages in Parliament, and this symbolic respect fosters inclusion [16]. Such measures signal that traditional cultures are valued, thereby encouraging indigenous citizens to engage with national governance.

5.6. Case Studies and Comparative Examples

To illustrate how indigenous knowledge can enter formal governance, we draw on several case examples:

- 1) Oromo Gada System (Ethiopia): The Gada system has itself been proposed as a source of wisdom for modern politics. Its UNESCO profile emphasizes its democratic features and rotational leadership [4]. Some Ethiopian scholars have suggested adopting elements of Gada's decentralized decision-making at the local or regional level, especially for community justice and youth involvement [2]. Aliye [13] extensively documents Gada's principles, such as its "egalitarian, broad grass root participation based social democracy where the real sovereignty of people is exercised and rule of law and equality are lived" [13], arguing these are remedies for African governance problems. For instance, the Oromia regional government has supported Gada centers as cultural institutions. However, Gada has not yet been formally integrated into federal processes. Its lessons - consensus-building, cyclical leadership, oral constitution - could inform legislation on local governance or community justice initiatives.
- 2) Gurage Yejoka Qicha (Ethiopia): The Yejoka Qicha council, like Gada [4], operates on egalitarian and consensus principles. Bitew et al. [5] note that while the system has democratic elements, it also historically excluded women and lower castes, illustrating that not all indigenous norms are progressive by modern standards.

This example highlights a caution: integrating indigenous practices requires scrutiny to avoid perpetuating inequities. Nonetheless, elements of Yejoka's communal deliberation could enrich Ethiopian local democracy if reformed to include all groups [5].

- 3) South Africa's Traditional Leaders Consultation: South Africa's Constitution and Parliament set an instructive precedent. Under Article 72 of the South African Constitution, Parliament must refer any bill affecting traditional communities' customs to the National House of Traditional Leaders. This body of hereditary and elected chiefs advises on cultural matters. Though it has no veto power, its referral right ensures that indigenous perspectives are at least formally considered in law-making. Ethiopia could emulate this model by creating an analogous referral system to an elders' council, ensuring consultation without requiring a constitutional overhaul.
- 4) Bolivia's Plurinational Constitution (2009): Bolivia offers a dramatic example of embracing indigenous knowledge at the highest level. Its 2009 constitution redefined Bolivia as a "Plurinational State" recognizing 36 indigenous nations [18]. It guarantees multilingualism (requiring the state to communicate in indigenous languages) and grants broad autonomy to indigenous territories [18]. Critically for legislative integration, Bolivia reserves seats in its Senate and Chamber of Deputies for representatives elected by indigenous communities. The ICT News report explains: "the new constitution reserves seats in the Senate and Congress specifically for representatives from indigenous communities, and officially recognizes forms of community justice practiced by many indigenous groups... as long as the practices adhere to existing Bolivian law" [18]. This ensured indigenous majorities had direct political power. While Ethiopia's context differs, it could learn from Bolivia's use of reserved representation and legal pluralism (e.g. formally acknowledging local justice systems).
- 5) Canada's Mi'kmaq Rights Initiative (MRI): Hanrahan [15] describes the MRI as an "attempt to reclaim the rightful Mi'kmaq place in treaty interpretation and governance" [15] and to "reroot governance in Indige-

nous culture" [15]. The MRI emphasizes consensus, Mi'kmaq values, and a nation-to-nation relationship, moving away from the flawed land claims process. This initiative shows how Indigenous nations can proactively design governance structures based on their own cultural foundations while engaging with state powers. Its vision for a "Mi'kmaq governance and cultural centre" [15] highlights the inextricable link between culture and governance.

- 6) Australia's Indigenous Governance Approaches: Vivian et al. [8] discuss how some Australian Indigenous collectives, like the Ngarrindjeri Nation and Gunditjmarra People, are establishing contemporary mechanisms of self-government, designing their own institutions, and negotiating inter-governmental relationships despite a lack of formal state recognition of their sovereignty [8]. Adjei [12] further details Australian efforts to protect Traditional Cultural Expressions (TCEs) and Traditional Knowledge (TK) through protocols and proposals like the National Indigenous Arts and Cultural Authority (NIACA), which aims to "ensure the protection of the rights of Indigenous peoples to their art and culture" [12], reflecting UNDRIP principles.
- 7) International Practices: The UN's State of the World's Indigenous Peoples and legislative-reform literature offer additional examples [16]. France allows some Cree representation in northern assemblies; Denmark's Parliament has a Greenlandic (Kalaallit) representative; Malaysia and Brunei reserve seats or allow unique positions for indigenous groups; and in Asia, India's Panchayati Raj (local councils) include Scheduled Tribes reserved seats [16]. The Agora-Parliament briefing notes that veto rights (as in Slovenia) and quotas (as in Serbia) have also been used to empower minorities [16]. Although these are not African legislatures, they demonstrate a spectrum: from formalized advisory roles to actual legislative veto or seat guarantees. Table 1 (below) summarizes key comparative models:

These models suggest that Ethiopia could adopt a mix of mechanisms. It might not fully replicate any one country's approach, but even partial measures - such as adding reserved seats at the HoF level or creating an experts' council - would signal a commitment to integration.

Table 1. Key Comparative Models (Summary).

Mechanism	Example Country/Context	Description
Reserved Seats / Quotas	Bolivia (indigenous seats in Congress) [18] Croatia (minority seats in Parliament) [16]	Legislatively guarantee a number of seats for indigenous/minority groups regardless of election outcomes.
Consultation Bodies	South Africa (National House of Traditional Leaders)Australia (proposed NIACA) [12]	Formal advisory council of traditional leaders/cultural authorities that must be consulted on relevant legislation.
Legal Recognition of Cus-	Bolivia (community justice recognized) [18] SA	Constitution or statute expressly allows customary

Mechanism	Example Country/Context	Description
customary Law	(customary law valid if not against constitution)	dispute resolution and outlines its relationship to national law.
Committee on Indigenous Affairs	Example: Proposed in Canada & New Zealand (e.g. Māori Affairs Committee) [16]	Specialized parliamentary committee to study and recommend on indigenous-related policy and legislation.
Language and Cultural Rights	Bolivia (official multilingualism) [18] Ethiopia (constitutional language equality) [6]	Guarantee use of indigenous languages and cultural expression within legislative and governmental processes.
Education and Training	Australia (Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait studies)	Initiatives to educate legislators about indigenous cultures and knowledge systems.
Obligation to Consult (Soft)	UNDRIP Articles 18, 19 (not direct law but normative) [12, 17] Australia (Arts Protocols) [12]	International norms/best practices suggesting states should consult indigenous peoples on policy affecting them.
Indigenous-led Governance Initiatives	Canada (Mi'kmaq Rights Initiative) [15] Australia (Ngarrindjeri & Gunditjmarra self-government efforts) [8]	Indigenous nations designing and implementing their own governance structures, often in negotiation with the state.

6. Constitutional, Legal, and Policy Reforms

Implementing the above mechanisms will likely require reforms at multiple levels:

- 1) Constitutional Amendments: To the extent that Ethiopia's constitution is rigid on these issues, formal amendment might be needed. For example, amending Article 53 [6] to explicitly mandate representation of indigenous institutions (not just "Nations, Nationalities and Peoples") in Parliament would establish a legal foundation. Adding a clause empowering Parliament to consult traditional assemblies on relevant laws could also be constitutionalized. Any amendment must carefully balance existing principles: for instance, recognizing traditional governance while reaffirming the primacy of constitutional rights (as Article 9 [6] does) to avoid legal conflicts.
- 2) Legal and Regulatory Changes: Parliament can pass new laws or change its own rules to operationalize integration. As noted, a Parliamentary Procedures Act could obligate consultations with a National Elders' Council on draft legislation concerning land, culture, environment, etc. An Electoral Code Amendment could institute minority quotas or threshold exemptions for indigenous parties [16]. Additionally, Ethiopia's family law (currently still based on religious or customary arbitration [6]) could be updated to recognize certain customary justice outcomes in civil law (similar to how community courts are sometimes allowed to enforce agreements). The Ministry of Culture could be tasked

by government policy to liaise with Parliament on heritage and knowledge issues, producing guidance notes for legislators. The development of sui generis systems, as discussed by Davis [14] for protecting traditional knowledge, could also be explored.

- 3) Policy Instruments: Beyond law, the executive and civil society can advance integration. For instance, Ethiopia's newly formed National Dialogue Commission (an existing platform for reconciliation) could include an Indigenous Knowledge pillar, reviewing how governance can incorporate local customs. Educational reforms can ensure that public administration and law curricula teach about indigenous systems, creating future policymakers who appreciate these perspectives [2]. Additionally, research funding from government or donors could support the documentation of indigenous laws and best practices, creating a resource for legislative drafting [2]. Policy briefs and workshops co-hosted by indigenous NGOs and academia can educate lawmakers and staff on traditional knowledge relevance. Borrini-Feyerabend and Hill [11] emphasize the need for "governance vitality," which includes being "well integrated and functionally connected," "adaptive," "wise," "innovative and creative," and "empowered" [11]. Policy instruments should aim to foster these qualities.

Each reform should be guided by Ethiopia's constitutional ideals of equality and self-determination. For example, Article 39 [6] affirms every "Nation, Nationality and People" has the unconditional right to self-determination (up to secession) and to preserve its culture and language. Leveraging this, one could interpret the right to "culture" as encompassing the right to have cultural knowledge inform national policies.

Advocates may thus argue that current gaps violate the spirit (if not the letter) of the constitution's protection of cultural life.

At the same time, reforms must comply with Ethiopia's international commitments. Ethiopia is a party to ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (though it has not yet ratified it) and the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*. Both instruments emphasize free, prior, and informed consent of indigenous communities on decisions affecting them (UNDRIP Articles 18, 19, as noted in Table 1) [12, 17]. While UNDRIP is not binding law, it can guide "good faith" policies: for instance, requiring meaningful consent of local communities before passing laws that affect traditional lands, which would empower elders and customary institutions. As Marks [17] argues, "The principle of informed consent applies not only to administrative acts and decisions, but also to the legislative process itself" [17].

7. Policy Recommendations

Based on the above analysis, we offer the following concrete recommendations for policymakers, civil society, and academics in Ethiopia:

- 1) Establish an Advisory Council of Elders: Create by law (or parliamentary decree) a National Council of Traditional Authorities composed of elected elders/traditional leaders from each major ethnic group. This council would be officially tasked with advising both Houses of Parliament and the government on cultural and indigenous knowledge matters. Its opinions on draft legislation in specified domains (e.g. environment, land, culture, education) should be formally solicited. This institutionalizes consultation without directly altering electoral processes. Adjei's [12] discussion of the proposed NIACA in Australia provides a relevant model for such an advocacy and administrative body.
- 2) Amend Electoral Laws for Minority Representation: Amend the electoral code to incorporate reserved quotas for Ethiopia's smaller nationalities or to exempt minority parties from electoral thresholds [16]. For example, enact a law guaranteeing that a fixed number of seats in the HoPR or HoF are filled by candidates nominated by a federation of traditional councils. Alternatively, reserve two or three seats per region specifically for non-partisan elder representatives, chosen through community assemblies. This ensures indigenous peoples have direct voices in Parliament, thereby bringing their knowledge into lawmaking.
- 3) Strengthen Parliamentary Committees on Cultural Affairs: Reconfigure existing parliamentary committees or establish a new standing committee focused on Cultural and Indigenous Affairs [16]. This committee should have a mandate to review all legislation for cultural impact and to engage with indigenous knowledge. It would oversee the Elders' Council and receive reports from it. By building internal capacity, Parliament can consistently factor cultural perspectives into its decisions.
- 4) Mandate Consultation in Legislative Procedure: Enact a rule requiring that any bill affecting customary lands, natural resources, or cultural practices be accompanied by a Cultural Impact Statement prepared in consultation with affected communities. Bills on such topics should require evidence of community consultation (e.g. transcripts of hearings with elders, written inputs from traditional councils) before final reading. This procedural safeguard (inspired by South African practice and international norms of free, prior, and informed consent [17]) ensures indigenous knowledge is brought to the table prior to enactment.
- 5) Embrace Multilingualism in Parliament: Fully implement Article 5 [6] by providing simultaneous interpretation and documentation in major indigenous languages (e.g. Afaan Oromo, Somali, Tigrinya, Afar) during parliamentary sessions and committee meetings. Permitting MPs to speak in their mother tongue (with interpretation) and encouraging presentations of indigenous scholars in local languages will make Parliament more accessible to non-Amharic communities. This respects Ethiopia's constitutional commitment to linguistic equality and lowers barriers to participation.
- 6) Incorporate Indigenous Studies in Academia: Encourage Ethiopian universities to develop curricula and research on indigenous governance systems, in collaboration with community elders [2]. This builds a domestic knowledge base of traditional practices and creates experts who can serve as bridges to Parliament. For instance, funding a "Chair of Indigenous Governance" at Addis Ababa University or regional universities would formalize scholarship in this area. Publications from such programs should be encouraged in Amharic and regional languages to influence local discourse.
- 7) Public Awareness and Capacity Building: Civil society organizations (CSOs), NGOs, and elders' associations should run public dialogues and workshops to raise awareness of indigenous rights and knowledge. CSOs can facilitate town hall meetings where community members draft proposals on how their traditions could inform national policy. These grassroots inputs can then be channeled to MPs and the media. Parliament should partner with CSOs to hold regional outreach events, signaling that indigenous input is valued.
- 8) Review and Reform Constitutional Provisions: Long-term, Ethiopia should consider a constitutional revision or interpretation clarifying the role of customary law. For example, redefining the Article 9 supremacy clause to explicitly exempt protected indigenous norms (as long as they do not violate core rights) could

legitimize a parallel jurisprudence for certain matters [6]. Any such reform must be preceded by a national dialogue on how to balance tradition and rights, involving constitutional experts, elders, women's groups, and human rights advocates.

8. Conclusion

Ethiopia stands at an important crossroads. Its rich indigenous knowledge systems - born of millennia of local experience - possess solutions and insights crucial for sustainable development, social justice, and cultural vitality. Yet these systems remain largely separate from the formal governance apparatus embodied by the Federal Parliament. Bridging this divide requires both political will and imaginative institutional design. Drawing on Ethiopia's own examples and global best practices - such as reserved seats, consultative houses, legal pluralism, and Indigenous-led initiatives - this article has outlined a comprehensive strategy for integration. Constitutional provisions already affirm the values of multilingualism and cultural rights; now, law and policy must give effect to those principles.

We have argued that mechanisms such as establishing an elders' advisory council, reforming electoral representation, and mandating consultations in legislative procedures can ensure indigenous perspectives inform laws and policies. These measures would not only honor Ethiopia's constitutional promise of equality and self-determination, but also increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of governance. When citizens see their own traditions respected and included, trust in institutions can deepen. Surveys have shown that Ethiopians often trust traditional authorities more than elected officials; integrating those authorities into the democratic process can strengthen the social contract.

In sum, the path to "bridging worlds" lies in mutual respect and legal innovation: recognizing that Ethiopia's many nations have their own ways of knowing that are assets to the whole country. By weaving indigenous knowledge into the fabric of parliamentary governance, Ethiopia can create laws and policies that are more rooted, resilient, and representative of its people. The authors encourage Ethiopian lawmakers, community leaders, and scholars to take up this challenge through the reforms and recommendations outlined above, thereby creating a model of inclusive governance worthy of Ethiopia's diverse heritage.

Abbreviations

CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
HoF	House of the Federation
HoPR	House of Peoples' Representatives
IDEA	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
IKS	Indigenous Knowledge Systems
IPU	Inter-parliamentary Union

MRI	Mi'kmaq Rights Initiative
NIACA	National Indigenous Arts and Cultural Authority
NGOs	Non-governmental Organizations
TCEs	Traditional Cultural Expressions
TK	Traditional Knowledge
UNDRIP	UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Author Contributions

Mohammed Zeinu Hassen is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



Mohammed Zeinu Hassen is an Ethiopian philosopher and academic who earned both his Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degrees in philosophy from Addis Ababa University. He has taught at Aksum University and currently serves as a senior researcher at Addis Ababa Science and Technology University, while also lecturing in the Department of Philosophy at Addis Ababa University. Presently, he is pursuing a PhD in philosophy at the University of South Africa. His research interests encompass ethics, consciousness, human purpose, analytical philosophy, axiology, and the philosophy of science, with a strong emphasis on intercultural dialogue. Among his notable publications are "John Dewey's Philosophy of Education: A Critical Reflection" (2023), "Scientific Law as Universal Propositions: In Defense of Realist Perspective to the Law of Nature" (2020), and "Cartesian Methodological Doubt Vis-à-Vis Pragmatism: An Approach to Epistemological Predicament" (2020).

Research Field

Mohammed Zeinu Hassen, Consciousness, Human purpose, Analytical philosophy, Axiology, Indigenous knowledge, Philosophy of science, Epistemology, Intercultural dialogue, Philosophy of education. AI and Public policy, Social and political philosophy.