

“Unconventional Canadians”: Second-Generation “Habesha” Youth and Belonging in Toronto, Canada



JUST SIX
QUESTIONS
RESEARCH
SUMMARY

“...even when citizens, future citizens and immigrants share the same legal status, the state’s racialized nation-building practices continue to distinguish between them, and to create unequal citizenship rights” (p. 188).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research examines how second-generation Ethiopian and Eritrean youth in Toronto – often identifying as *Habesha* – develop their sense of identity and belonging. *Habesha* is a term that extends beyond established borders and serves as “a collective labeling that is based on shared common language, culture, religion, physical characteristics, ancestral origins, and shared experiences as second-generation Ethiopian/Eritrean youth in the Diaspora” (p. 186). The researcher explored the social process of identity development to foster an understanding of how youth anticipate and respond to various life experiences. The findings reveal how the identities of these youth are shaped, both by their parents’ experiences of migration and globalization and by how Canada’s policies and practices of multiculturalism define who ‘belongs’ and who is viewed as an ‘outsider’.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The research was conducted within Ethiopian and Eritrean diasporic communities in Toronto.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

The study focuses on second-generation Ethiopian and Eritrean youth (Canadian-born children of first-generation immigrant parents from Ethiopia or Eritrea) between the ages of 18 and 30 and living in Toronto.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

A total of 20 participants were recruited by the researcher during a camping retreat hosted by a non-profit organization that the researcher had built relationships and trust with over a five-month period.

This study was designed to be **qualitative**, exploring participants’ experiences, perspectives, and meanings in depth by gathering rich, descriptive data to understand how and why participants think or act in certain ways.

The researcher conducted face-to-face, **in-depth interviews** lasting 60-90 minutes with each of the 20 participants, who gave **informed consent**, ensuring they understood the study and agreed to take part voluntarily. The interviews were **semi-structured**, meaning there was a standard set of open-ended questions but also space for participants to guide the conversation and share their stories in their own words. Before each interview, demographic information was collected. All interviews were **recorded** and later **transcribed** (written out word for word).

The researcher analyzed the interview transcripts using a **three-step grounded theory process**:

- i) **Open coding**: breaking down the transcripts line by line to identify first-level concepts and patterns in participants’ words.
- ii) **Axial coding**: examining relationships among these concepts to develop broader themes and categories.
- iii) **Selective coding**: connecting the themes to form a clear storyline that explains how identity development happens.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

The researchers identified **two main and interconnected themes**:

i) Developing Cultural Capital and Ethnic Identities

Youth emphasized the importance of maintaining their Ethiopian and Eritrean heritage, including cultural traditions, values, and family practices. This connection to heritage provided them with **a sense of pride, continuity, and resilience** in navigating life in Canada.

ii) Becoming “Habesha” – A Shared, Supra-National Identity

Many youth adopted the term *Habesha* as **a collective identity** that embraces both Ethiopian and Eritrean heritage. A key part of this experience is the contrast between *private* and *public* spaces.

In *private* spaces – such as homes, church gatherings, cultural celebrations, or youth camps – young people felt **recognized** and **accepted** as Ethiopian or Eritrean. These settings **affirmed** their cultural traditions, languages, and values, giving them **a sense of comfort, belonging, and connection**. Being surrounded by people who shared the same heritage meant they could **express their identity freely**, without having to explain or defend themselves.

In contrast, in *public* spaces – like schools, workplaces, and interactions with non-*Habesha* peers – youth often felt **marginalized** or **excluded**. They sometimes encountered **stereotypes, racial discrimination, or a lack of understanding** about their heritage. Even though they were Canadian-born, they were often **treated as outsiders** and were **expected to conform** to mainstream (predominantly white) norms rather than fully express their own identities.

These lived experiences intersect with broader critiques of Canada’s multiculturalism policy, which the researcher argues can be understood as a contested site for political recognition that sustains English-Canadian dominance and as a mechanism for **assimilating racialized minorities**.

The youth in the study were critical of this policy; in response, many embraced the supra-national identity of

Habesha as a means of **resisting exclusion** and **asserting belonging**. This identity emerges from both *internal* socialization (through family traditions and ancestral heritage) and *external* socialization (through experiences of marginalization within Canadian society). Experiencing exclusion often strengthened these young people’s connection to their ancestral cultures, motivating transnational activities such as visiting parents’ homelands, joining youth groups, and engaging in cultural practices like food and dance. At the same time, the youth’s negotiation between Ethiopian/Eritrean family values and Canadian principles – such as equality, rationality, and diversity – fostered a hybrid cultural identity, expressed collectively through their identification as *Habesha*.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

Understanding how young people identify – and how they may create **hybrid cultural identities** – is significant for advancing youth wellbeing, because **belonging, recognition, and a sense of self** are vital to young people’s development.

When public policies and social attitudes make youth feel excluded, their mental health can be negatively affected, their participation in schools and communities reduced, and their sense of self and security diminished. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for practitioners who work with youth, who aim to create **inclusive** spaces where racialized youth feel **valued, recognized, and supported to thrive**.

Q Goitom, M. (2017). “Unconventional Canadians”: Second-generation “Habesha” youth and belonging in Toronto, Canada. *Global Social Welfare*, 4(4), 179–190.