

**Iddir in Gondar: Historical Development and Its Role in Promoting Social Interaction among Different ‘Ethno-Linguistic’ Groups (1936 -1994)**

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**Abstract:** *This study explores the genesis and potential roles of iddir in the social interaction of diverse ethno-linguistic groups in Gondar from 1936 to 1994. Although different iddirs have played a dominant role in the integration of different ethnic groups in Gondar since the early Italian invasion of the town, no academic investigation has clearly chronicled their origin and their potential role in promoting social cohesion. The study employed a qualitative method of data collection. The research has extensively used archival, literary and oral sources. Archival sources collected from the Central Gondar Administration Zonal archives all passed through scientific analysis and interpretation controlling for bias, whether the source of data was records, documents, photographs or newspapers. In order to affirm the archival evidence, the researcher also interviewed many elders who were or are members of iddirs, composed of different ethnic groups. The selection of informants was done through the snowball sampling method, and the interview was open-ended. Published materials were also used. The researcher carefully used all the above sources in order to fill the gap in each source of data. The aim of this study was to review the historical development and the roles of iddir in the interaction of different ethno-linguistic groups in Gondar. This study provides original work. Similarly, it avoids the shortage of written documents and fills the gaps. The findings of the study show that indigenous social institutions have roles in enabling the new generation to know what happened in the past, strengthening their mutual understanding and building a sense of belonging. Through iddir, the Gondarines not only participated in funerals but also had opportunities for social*

*interaction, overcoming social problems, the development of friendship, conflict resolution, sharing information and overcoming economic challenges.*

**Keywords:** *Ethno-linguistic groups, Gondar, Iddir, Interaction, Italian invasion*

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## 1. Introduction

Cooperation among humans can be traced back to the ancient times when people started to live together and cooperate in gathering, hunting and shelter construction. The ancient civilizations practiced collaboration among themselves, from cooperative farming to establishing informal savings and loan associations.<sup>62</sup> The social connection norms and social trust that an individual acquires from the community help solve day-to-day challenges. For sustainable development, informal institutions, especially at the local level, are important for mobilizing resources and regulating their use with a view to maintaining a long-term foundation for productive activities.<sup>63</sup> Those communities endowed with a rich stock of social networks and civic associations will be in a stronger position to confront poverty and vulnerability, resolve disputes and take advantage of new opportunities.<sup>64</sup>

Although it is not structured properly, the people of Gondar have evolved a traditional non-governmental method of self-help that plays an important role in the struggle of their daily lives and is a source of strength to the family at times of birth, marriage, illness and death.<sup>65</sup> Even though, French historians and Marxist thoughts brought about dramatic changes to history from top to bottom, most native and foreign scholars have given little attention to the political and economic history of Gondar and Ethiopia in general and ignore these affairs.<sup>66</sup> These institutions, however, have not been well studied by previous scholars and deserve close attention on account of their economic and social significance to contemporary Ethiopia as well as the possibilities they may afford those who are planning the present renaissance;<sup>67</sup> they also reveal people's capacity to organize for their own welfare.

These traditional associations (*iddir* and *iqub*) are based on participatory principles, and as a result, they tend to promote accountability, transparency, tolerance and dialogue. In addition, they tend to foster friendship among members. *Iqub* and *iddir* can be used as a basis for doing business, mutual support and caring purposes, in that order. The commitment of people to these traditional organizations should indeed be expanded and enhanced to include some advocacy content on socio-economic issues.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Arega Bazezew and Wubliker Chanie, Iddirs as Community-based Social Capital in the Amhara Region of Ethiopia: Case Study in Gende Town, The Ethiopian Journal of Social Sciences (EJSS), Vol.1, No.1 (2015), 4.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup>Richard Pankhurst and Endreas Eshete, Self-help in Ethiopia, Ethiopia Observer, Vol. II, No. 11 (1958), 355.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup>Dejen Aredo, The Informal and Semi-Formal Financial Sectors in Ethiopia: A study of the Iqub, Iddir, and Savings and Credit Co-operative, African Economics Research Consortium, No.23 (1993), 9-11.

### 1.1. Background

Originally, *iddirs* were established to organize the funerals of their members and provide support to the bereaved. In the context of urban migration, *iddir* developed into a voluntarily multifunctional institution of self-help and solidarity.<sup>69</sup> There is no exact historical evidence that contests the early origin of *iddir*; however, Pankhurst and Endreas suggest that it might have basically originated from the Gurage people.<sup>70</sup> It is said to have become important, however, at the time of the Italian invasion, when life became disorganized and a large number of people were killed, leaving no relatives to bury them. Since then, the institution has undoubtedly spread rapidly as a result of the expansion of market economy in the post-World War II period.<sup>71</sup>

There are a number of sociological and contemporary investigations conducted on *iddirs* either at local and national levels. Regarding the overall general definition and its historical development, as mentioned in the Encyclopedia *Æthiopica*, Bustorf and Schaefer were the first scholars to provide information about *iddir*.<sup>72</sup> While the origin of *iddir* in Ethiopia requires more investigation, the citations of Tenagashaw, Alula, and Damen illustrate that this institution may have originated during the early twentieth century.<sup>73</sup> Some of the pioneers in this area are Pankhurst and Endreas, who highlighted that *iddir* is an indigenous voluntary association, although there are similar associations elsewhere in Africa.<sup>74</sup> They boldly stress that it gained more wide-ranging popularity and diffusion among the Gurage people as soon as the Italian invasion. When life became disorganized and following the fascist rule, the aforesaid people began *iddir* in an organized way.<sup>75</sup> The other scholar who agrees with the rural origin of *iddir* is Dejen. He attempts to show the origin and types of *iddirs* at a national level, it is too short and did not chronicle *iddir* properly. Besides, he did not give special attention to *iddirs* independently; he compares them with other non-formal associations.<sup>76</sup> However, his second work has a very detailed explanation and description, and the author also tries to show how *iddir* benefited the people in his study area. Yet like his precursors and successors, he fails to deal with the association outside of Addis Ababa.<sup>77</sup>

Regarding the types, structure, membership and general administration of self-help associations, some authors like Pankhurst and Endreas, Alula and Damen discuss them extensively. The most prevalent one is the neighborhood *iddir*, which is formed by a group of people living in the same area. The second is workplace *iddir*, and the third is ethnic-based *iddir*, which is formed by

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<sup>69</sup>Dirk Bustorf and Charles G.H. Schaefer, Edder, Encyclopedia *Æthiopica*, (2005), 838.

<sup>70</sup>Pankhurst and Endreas, Self-help in Ethiopia, 358.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup>Bustorf and Schaefer, Edder, 838.

<sup>73</sup>Alula Pankhurst and Damen Haile Mariam, The “Iddir” in Ethiopia Historical Development, Social Function, and Potential Role in HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control, Northeast Africa Studies, Vol.7, No.2(2000), 35-57.

<sup>74</sup>Pankhurst and Endreas, Self-help in Ethiopia, 358.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup>Dejen, The Informal and Semi-Formal, 28-33.

<sup>77</sup>\_\_\_\_\_, The Iddir: An Informal Insurance Arrangement in Ethiopia, Saving and Development, Vol.34, No.1 (2010), 57-72.

people from the same ethno-linguistic group. However, at this time, there are various types of *iddirs*.<sup>78</sup> Because of its nature, except for Pankhurst and Endreas, most of the studies on *iddir* originally came from the schools of sociology and anthropology, but later on from other fields of study such as geography and environmental studies, economics, sports science and architecture.<sup>79</sup> Most of them elaborate their investigation using secondary and oral sources; they do not use archival sources, and at the same time, they deal mostly with the current structural and general situation of *iddirs* in each respective area instead of historical investigations.<sup>80</sup>

Although they focused on more contemporary sociological interpretation, relatively better than the others Alula, Alula and Damen, Arega and Wubliker tried their best to deal with the way *iddirs* were transformed from non-official to official status by citing 1955 legislation and the 1960 civil code.<sup>81</sup> Another thorough explanation of *iddir* in the Ethiopian context, with particular attention to Kembata and Wolaita, is also provided by Léonard; although it mostly deals with the aforementioned areas, the study is overall a great sociological work instead of a historical one.<sup>82</sup> Most of the above scholars' studies only deal with the current condition of *iddir*, unlike historical investigations, and they are outside of Gondar.<sup>83</sup> The other interesting paper is the work of Getachew, in which he discusses the *iddir* of the Ethiopian refugees who are living in Toronto. Of course, he is not only dealing with *iddir* but also the other informal institutions for resettlement adjustment. His explanation and idea flow are fine, yet his work, like others, faces constraints, which means the study focuses on Ethiopians living abroad.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, with these intentions, the major role of this study is to investigate *iddir* in Gondar: historical development and its potential role in the social interaction among different ethno-linguistic groups from 1936 to 1994. Even though there is literature at a national level about *iddir*, there is a lack of empirical data about *iddir* in Gondar, so the study is the first original work. Hence, its main objective is to assess the historical roles of *iddir* in the interaction of different ethnic groups in Gondar.

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<sup>78</sup>Alula and Damen, The "Iddir", 39-43; Pankhurst and Endreas, Self-help in Ethiopia,358.

<sup>79</sup>Yenenhun Taye, The Role of Iddirs for Family Welfar at Kebele 02, Dire Dawa City Administration Ethiopia, The International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, Vol.4, No.6 (2016),143-152; Dejen, The Informal and Semi-Formal, 28-33;\_\_\_,The Iddir., 57-72; Arega and Wubliker, Iddirs as Community-based,3-6.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup>Alula Pankhurst, The Emergence, Evolution and Transformations of Iddir Funeral Associations in Urban Ethiopia,Journal of Ethiopian Studies, Vol. 41, No. 1/2 (June-December 2008), 155; Alula and Damen, The "Iddir", 39-43; Arega and Wubliker, Iddirs as Community-based,9-10.

<sup>82</sup>Thomas Léonard, Ethiopian Iddirs Mechanisms: Case study in pastoral communities in Kembata and Wolaita, Inter aide(April 2013), 1-104.

<sup>83</sup>Alula, The Emergence, 155; Alula and Damen, The "Iddir", 39-43; Arega and Wubliker, Iddirs as Community-based, 9-10.

<sup>84</sup>Getachew Mequanent, The Role of Informal Organizations in Resettlement Adjustment Process: A Case Study of Iqubs, Idirs and Mahabers in the Ethiopian Community in Toronto, Canada's, Journal on Refuge, Vol. 15, No. 3(1996), 30-39.

## 2. Research Methods

### 2.1. Description of the study area

The present study was conducted in Gondar City which was the capital of Ethiopia during medieval-period and situated in the northern part of Ethiopia in the Amhara National Regional State. It is one of the metropolitan towns in Ethiopia, in the historical province of Begemder, now renamed Central Gondar Zone.<sup>85</sup> It evolved from an obscure 17<sup>th</sup> century market town in the flourishing capital of the Ethiopian monarchy, passed through an era of decline and destruction, and underwent a slow renaissance in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>86</sup> Gondar had become a permanent capital under Emperor Fasiladas (r. 1632-67). His successors also made the capital their abode, and they also built churches and castles. Though the construction of palaces and churches gave Gondar an air of grandeur, its general picture was one of an agglomeration of squalid villages.<sup>87</sup> The size of the town continued to grow and by the 1760s it seems to have reached the Keha and Angereb rivers, which flanked Gondar on both sides and joined at its southernmost end.<sup>88</sup> Gondar, the capital of Begemder and Semien provinces, is located 740 km northwest of Addis Ababa, 523 km southwest of Asmara, and 220 km southwest of neighboring Sudan, respectively.<sup>89</sup>

### 2.2. Research Methods

The study employed qualitative methods of data collection; both primary and secondary sources were used. First of all, books, articles, senior essays, and MA theses were collected and desk review was conducted. Moreover, various sources from the Gondar public library and Addis Ababa University libraries as well as different websites were also consulted. The originality of these sources was cross-checked by comparing them with other existing archival and oral testimonies. Second, archival materials were also gathered from the Central Gondar Administration Zonal Archives; however, before using them as sources, the researcher evaluated these sources through internal/external or high and low criticism. The next step was the careful interpretation of these sources based on the historical method, which means out of bias and keeping its objectivity and trustworthiness.

Finally, an in-depth interview guide was prepared based on the objectives of the study to collect oral information from key informants in the study area. That means key informants were selected and interviewed face-to-face, in private, or in groups within the open-ended interview method. The identification of key informants was based on the snowball sampling technique. The interview focused on elders who took part in *iddir*. The informant's oral source was changed to

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<sup>85</sup>Tesfamichael Fentie, A Historical Survey of Socio-Cultural Interaction and Integration between Amhara and Tigre People in Gondar Town from 1930 to 1974, (Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Gondar, 2020), 1-3.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup>Solomon Addis, A History of the City of Gondar, Trenton: Africa World Press, 2006, 1-2, 19, 31-32, 165.

Amharic transcription and was then translated into English. The accuracy of the oral information was cross-checked against other oral testimonies and written sources. The data collected through different methods was carefully examined, cross-checked, analyzed and interpreted in order to produce a scientific study.

### **3. Historical Origin of *Iddir* in Gondar**

Since the foundation of Gondar to the present, there have been different religious and non-religious self-help institutions that assembled the noblesse, laities and other groups of people and facilitated the lives of the settlers' in each respective settlement and among these was the *iddir*.<sup>90</sup>

Of course, a number of archival sources tell us that the origin of *iddir* in Gondar flourished around the late 1960s and early 1970s; yet many informants gave their testimony about the origin of *iddir* in Gondar as early as the Gurage people, especially in and around Gondar in many rural districts, people exercised this type of social welfare to support each other in times of happiness and bad fortune.<sup>91</sup> Gondar, as the central part of Italian colonial administration, was under Italian occupation. Many patriots who resisted the colonial attempt and some who opposed the Italian decree were torched to death.<sup>92</sup> Their dead bodies were sent outside the city in which the early town settlers settled, and these people took responsibility to bury the dead body regardless of ethnic, religious and social status. So this indicates that before the 1960s, there were many unofficial social burial institutions for Gondar people.<sup>93</sup> However, the situation changed in the decade from 1955 to 1965 due in part to legislation decreed at the time. The 1955 Constitution gave a legal basis for associations (Article 4).<sup>94</sup> There was no association established in Gondar up until the 1960s and 1970s. This was in part because the Constitution granted the right of association in principle but without practical provisions. The big change came with the 1960 Civil Code, which had provisions for the formation and functioning of associations.<sup>95</sup>

#### **3.1.Types of *Iddir* and Its Formation**

The new legislation was also a welcome signal for the *meredaja mahber* migrant association, which is interested in raising funds for their home areas.<sup>96</sup> So according to the legal basis legislation, the earliest association that was established in Gondar in 1964 was Gondar Hawaryat *iddir mahber* (a community *iddir*). Then, in the later successive years till 1977, more than 20 *meredaja mahber* were established in Gondar.<sup>97</sup> These were Ye Melestegna-Shketashkete

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<sup>90</sup>Informants: Demelash Beyene and Mulu Shitaye.

<sup>91</sup>Informant: Enanu Ayele; CGAZA, Folder No.፳፱-102, File No., 4023/32/34/7-655/፳46/251/8, (June 7, 1974/29/May 1967 E.C), NP.

<sup>92</sup>Informants: Demelash Beyene and Mulu Shitaye.

<sup>93</sup>Informants: Demelash Beyene and Enanu Ayele.

<sup>94</sup>Alula, *The Emergence*, 155.

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup>Informant: Demelash Beyene.

Negadewoch (stock traders), Awura Godana Serategnoch (institutional *iddir*) and Kame Sira *iddirs* (church *iddir*) in 1969; Ye Fikir Selam (community *iddir*) in 1970; Astedader-Tsfete Bete Serategnoch (institutional *iddir*) in 1971.<sup>98</sup>Ye Gondar Bete-Mengiste Akababie (community *iddir*) in 1972; Kayla-Meda, Kidus-Yareed, and Gabriel *iddirs* (community *iddirs*) in 1973; and Ye Temariwoch *meredaj mahber* (student's *iddir*) in 1974.<sup>99</sup> Dare Genda Yostatiwose in 1975, Abune Argawie, Kidus-Yohannes, and Kaha-Eyesus in 1975.<sup>100</sup>Deremo-Afafe, Ye Andnete Safer (community *iddirs*), Ye Arada Ye Kene-Serategnoch (labor *iddir*), and Ye Tigre *meredaja mahber* (ethnic-based *iddir*) in 1974, Erke-Bete (community *iddir*) in 1976, and Atatami-Kidus Michael (community *iddir*) in 1977.<sup>101</sup>

The members of each of the above associations were different ethnic groups such as the Amhara (mostly), Tigre, Kimant, and Bete-Israel.<sup>102</sup> Of course, as the name indicates, Ye Tigre *meredaja mahber's* members were mostly Tigreans. However, with archival sources, observation and deep interpretation, evidence suggests that there were a number of double-identity Amhara-Tigre family members in this *iddir*.<sup>103</sup> Kame Sira *iddir* is unlike the above community-based *iddirs*; it rather has a religious basis. The founders were different ethnic groups of the town's spiritual students and EOTC members of Medhani Alem Church, whose major aim was to support poor Christians during religious holidays and give spiritual service to the church.<sup>104</sup>Ye Temariwoch *meredaja mahber* is another *iddir* that was established by Gondar high school students who were from all religious and ethnic groups, and the major motive of this *iddir* was to support members of the *mahber* when they faced challenges in their educational and day-to-day lives.<sup>105</sup>In the first period of the establishment of *iddirs* in Gondar, the most common community type was *iddir*, often composed of between 5 and 50 members, though following its establishment; the members of *iddir* exceeded their previous number by as much as 100 and above.<sup>106</sup>*Iddir* is a combination and sometimes agglomeration with other systems of mutual help such as *iqub*, *mahaber*, and *senbete* and can become an instrument for the integration of different ethnic groups regardless of religious persuasion, so *iddir* created solidarity particularly between Tigre and Amhara ethnic groups in Gondar.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>98</sup>CGAZA, Folder No. ፳፱-102, File No., NP.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup>*Ibid.*; Informant: Demelash Beyene.

<sup>104</sup>Tiyent Gondar, Amharic Monthly Newspaper, No.1 (April-May 7/1974), 6; Informants: Mulu Gebre-Kidan and Chkula Tadesse.

<sup>105</sup>CGAZA, File No., 4023/32/34/7 -655/አ 46/251/8, Mahibârat, (June 7, 1974/29/ May 1975), NP; Alula, The Emergence, 155. Iddirs of Gondar not only created solidarity between Tigre-Amhara, rather it is source of integration and acculturation among different ethnic groups who have been lived in the city for many years.

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup>CGAZA, Mahibârat, NP.

The 1960 civil code had provisions for the formation and functioning of associations.<sup>108</sup> In addition, the 1962 Labour Relations Decree No. 40 and the 1963 Labour Relations Proclamation No. 210 concerning professional associations created a conducive atmosphere for specific selections of the urban population – factory workers – to organize themselves.<sup>109</sup> In response to these decrees, members of Gondar Astedader Tsfete Bete Serategnoc requested in a letter dated “Ref No: 7/ጠ 48361ተ 139” the recognition of their new *iddir*, and they got the imperial acceptance.<sup>110</sup> Just like the *iddir* members mentioned earlier, members of Awura Godana Serategnoch in a letter dated “Ref No: 1187/45/1” made similar requests and the government representative responded that working in one sector was enough to interact with each other, so they were not successful until the coming of the junta to power in the country's history.<sup>111</sup>

### 3.2. Membership

Basically, all *iddirs* have relatively similar structure and function; they are based on proximity and have helping members during bereavement as their main and common function. Earlier, it was pointed out that the amount of money specified as dues and aid, the frequency of meetings, and the sum for fines are all variable.<sup>112</sup> The number of chiefs of *iddirs* also shows a slight variation from *iddir* to *iddir*. Except for a little monetary and regulatory difference, all community *iddirs* in Gondar follow the same rules and regulations.<sup>113</sup> First, the would-be *iddir* elects a chief, a secretary, an announcer of death of a member and twenty committee members. Each member of the *iddir* must pay a registration fee of 25 cents and an entirely separate fee of 1-2 birr to spend on a feast.<sup>114</sup> The officers and committee must meet once a fortnight to consider the duties of the *iddir*, study proposed new rules, purchase equipment, and impose penalties on members who break the rules of the *iddir* in cases of lateness, absenteeism or someone who shows disrespectful behavior.<sup>115</sup>

All members must attend once a month and pay 75 cents. Out of this fund, the family of every man or woman who dies will receive 50 birr from the secretary. The Death Announcer will receive a salary of 10 birr a month. When a member or relative of a member dies, he walks through the streets of the town to make the announcement, blowing his trumpet /*trumba*/.<sup>116</sup> All

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<sup>108</sup> Alula, The Emergence, 155.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> CGAZA, Folder No., ጠ፱-102, File No. አ, 1445, Ref No:7/ጠ48361ተ139, AstedaderTsfeteBeteMärrädäjä Mahibär, (May 10/1963E.C).

<sup>111</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, File No., 1/አ, Ref No: 1187/45/1, AwuraGodanaSerategnochMärrädäjä Mahibär, (October 26 /1961E.C).

<sup>112</sup> Alemayehu Seifu, Eder in Addis Ababa: A Sociological Study, Ethiopia Observer, Vol. 12, No.1 (1968), 15; Informant: Mulu Gebre-Kidan.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> CGAZA, Folder No., ጠ፱-102, File No. አ, 164572/1, Ref No: 125812/አ26/151/8, Abune Aregawi Märrädäjä Mahibär, (April 2 /1967E.C), 1-2; Pankhurst and Endreas, Self-help in Ethiopia, 358.

<sup>114</sup> Pankhurst and Endreas, Self-help in Ethiopia, 358.

<sup>115</sup> CGAZA, Abune Aregawi Märrädäjä Mahibä, 1-2; Pankhurst and Endreas, Self-help in Ethiopia, 358.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*



members will then go immediately to the house of the deceased and carry him or her to the grave. Any member who has heard of the death and fails to attend will pay a fine of 1-2 birr or bring *injera* into the deceased's home to give it to *iddir* members who will come back from the funeral. In the case of the death of a member's mother, father, children, brother, or sister, the member will receive 2 birr from each of them.<sup>117</sup> In the event of the death of his distant relative and servant, he receives 10 birr from the secretary. If a member is fired from his job, and, as a consequence, is unemployed, there will be a meeting of the committee to decide how much assistance he should be given.<sup>118</sup> In case of severe illness of a member or a spouse of a member, he will receive 20 birr, and in case the member changes his workplace to other districts or areas, he will receive 30 birr from the secretary after a farewell ceremony.<sup>119</sup>

### 3.3. Membership Contribution

Thus, *iddir's* support for the family of the deceased takes several forms. In terms of support in kind, most of the time, each family was supposed to contribute a small amount of chickpeas and a small amount of coffee that were going to be prepared and eaten during the bereavement of the deceased.<sup>120</sup> According to the rules of *iddir*, this amount consisted of several cups usually 3–5 cups of chickpeas and 1 glass of coffee. In line with the *iddir's* regulations, the grain could be given directly from the members to the family or collected by the *iddir* members that donate it to the family.<sup>121</sup> Additionally, in many *iddirs*, each family was committed to providing one bundle of firewood that was also going to be used for cooking during the numerous visits of guests to the bereaved family.<sup>122</sup>

The *iddir* provides financial support in the form of cash as a gift to the family of the deceased to cover miscellaneous expenses related to the funeral and mourning.<sup>123</sup> This donation follows a specific direction since no money was given directly from a family member to the family. The operation was actually managed by *iddir* members. This amount of money could vary according to the regulations of each *iddir*.<sup>124</sup> In the case of material support, *iddirs provide* tents, cooking utensils, benches, barrels and several sets of dishes (cups, glasses) for the family of the deceased during the time of mourning.<sup>125</sup>

The *iddir* members will be responsible for several activities such as announcing the death to other members, digging a grave, making a coffin, carrying the body, putting up the tent (the duty of male members), preparing coffee, fetching water and doing farm work for the family of the

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* The most well-known Death Announcer of Abun Bet Gabriel area *iddir* was Melku Ewnetu, but now retired.

<sup>118</sup> CGAZA, Abune Aregawi Märrädäja Mahibä, 2.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Informants: Melku Ewnetu and Mulu Abreha; Léonard, Ethiopian Iddir, 23.

<sup>123</sup> Léonard, Ethiopian Iddirs, 23.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

deceased, as the family was not supposed to work during their mourning (e.g., sowing, hoeing, and weeding).<sup>126</sup> During the period of mourning, the bereaved family receives the respect and condolences of relatives and friends, as well as *iddir* members, who work in shifts to welcome guests and support the family.<sup>127</sup> It should be mentioned that no circumstance could exempt any member from participating in the *iddir* commitment, except perhaps a serious illness. For instance, one daily laborer who would not participate in an *iddir* event because he was not present would have to pay fines.<sup>128</sup>

### **3.4. Historical Roles of *Iddir* in the Interaction among People**

#### **3.4.1. Historical overview of Ethno-Linguistic groups in Gondar**

Since the foundation of Gondar in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and until 1935, different ethnic and religious groups of the country lived in different parts in the town in their own separate quarters.<sup>129</sup> The 1994 national census reported that the three largest ethnic groups in Gondar were the Amhara (88.91%), the Tigre (6.74%), and the Kimant (2.37%); all other ethnic groups made up 1.98 percent of the population. Amharic is spoken as the first language by 94.57% of Ethiopians in Gondar in and 4.67% of Tigreans; the remaining 0.7% speaks all other primary languages.<sup>130</sup> One of the earliest settlers in Gondar were the Amharas, most of them practice Orthodox Christianity. Most predominantly, they belong to the Begemder, Gojjam, Shoa, and Wollo Amharas. They settled around the palace, surrounded the churches, and lived together in cases of religious and social gatherings according to their religion.<sup>131</sup>

Except for Orthodox Christians since early Yohannes I (r. 1667-82) rule, other ethnic and religious groups of Gondar have lived in their own separate quarters, which means the Muslims around Addis Alame, Bete-Iraels in Kayla Meda (a pejorative term), Kimant in Kereker and the surrounding rural area, and Tigreans since the 1930s have lived in some parts of the town as seasonal workers.<sup>132</sup> Yet this came to an end when the Italians were defeated at the last battle of Gondar in November 1941. Since this time, each of the ethnic and religious groups has begun to settle in Gondar. Tigreans also first settled in four-story apartments and were later granted a permanent quarter at Dargenda, locally called Agame Sefere.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>126</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup>Informant: Alemitu Degu.

<sup>128</sup>Informant: Chkula Taddese.

<sup>129</sup>Tesfamicael Fentie, Historical Celebration of Epiphany in Gondar, (BA Senior Essay, Wolaita Sodo University, 2015), 3.

<sup>130</sup>Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Population Censuses Commission, Summary and Statistical Report of 2009 Population and Housing Census Results for Amhara Region State (Addis Ababa, 1994), tables: 2.1, 2.7, 2.10, 2.13, 2.17.

<sup>131</sup>Tesfamichael, A Historical Survey, 3.

<sup>132</sup>*Ibid.*, 3,4,6.

<sup>133</sup>*Ibid.*,37.

### 3.4.2. The Role of *Iddir* in the Interaction

The people of Gondar have had a number of self-help institutions that have improved their lives. Before we deal with the roles of *iddirs* in the interaction with other ethnic groups, let us first see the major *iddirs* of the Amhara, Tigre, Kimant, Bet-Israel and other small ethnic groups.<sup>134</sup> Tigre-Amhara communities have had a long year of civic organization solidarity. The most notable *iddir* that dominantly integrated the aforesaid ethnic groups was Kidus Gabriel (Ye Warkaw).<sup>135</sup> Kidus Gabriel Relief Society was established following the downfall of the fascist government; however, it did not receive government recognition until 1973. It is the oldest relief society, which reflects the age-old interaction and integration among the people of Gondar and its continued existence.<sup>136</sup> Before many *iddirs* were established, members of the Kidus Gabriel relief society from many parts of the town, including Belico, Bete Kihnte, Otto Barko, Fechfachite, and other parts, were involved. The founding members of the society are still present.<sup>137</sup>

According to the legislative decree issued on May 16, 1967, the relief society was formed on May 7, 1973, Ref No. 4807/12/45/8, in a letter of recommendation. This is a charitable organization that is comprised of many different ethnic groups.<sup>138</sup> The following officials were board directors of Kidus Gabriel *iddir*: Semu Jenberie, Berhane Moche, Mengestu Nigatu, Aragaw Gebrie, Admasu Wolde-Mariyam, Molla Lisane-Worke, and Zewedu Abebe.<sup>139</sup> Although most of the leaders were Amharas, there were also other ethnic groups. One of the significant features that made this *iddir* different from others was that many Tigre people who had settled in Gondar in successive years quickly joined this *iddir*.<sup>140</sup> The Kimant ethnic groups, also in their direct economic ties with the town, particularly around the area of this relief, began to rent houses; some bought them and became highly involved in the *iddir*.<sup>141</sup> Bete-Israel and Muslims (in the non-religious category) were also involved. Although most of the founders and former members of this relief society died of sickness and old age, their children and the rest of the settlers in the town still continued to be members regardless of any differences.<sup>142</sup>

Like the Gabriel Relief Society, the Abune Aregawie association was a notable one that reflected the early Amhara-Tigre interaction. Although this association was officially established in 1974,

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<sup>134</sup>Informants: Molla Lisan-Worke and Mengeiste Melkie.

<sup>135</sup>Informants: Mulu Shetaye and Hailu Berhane.

<sup>136</sup>Informants: Mulu Shetaye and Argawine Berhie.

<sup>137</sup>Informants: Mulu Shetaye and Hailu Berhane. As an observer the researcher can be testimony to this long age Amhara-Tigre interaction in this *iddir* because the founding members of the two family offspring still involved in the historical interaction.

<sup>138</sup>CGAZA, Folder No., ጡ-102, File No. 7, 199/68/1, Ref No: 4807/ጡ12/45/8, Kidus Gabriel Iddir Mahibâr, (April, 22 /1965 E.C), 2.

<sup>139</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup>Informants: Enanu Aylele and Sisay Muche.

<sup>141</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup>Informants: Lete-Berhan G/Michael and Hidija Jebriel.

it had a very long history before its formal establishment.<sup>143</sup> The founders and members showed more integration than many other *meredaja mahbers* of the two peoples. Of course, the monthly meeting place of this *iddir* was, just like the Gabriel, in the houses of the secretary, board members and president.<sup>144</sup> As the Gabriel *iddir* received its name from a parish church, the Abune Aregawie *iddir* also received its name from the church of Abune Aregawie, which is located down the road from Debre Selam Apostolic School.<sup>145</sup>

The founding members of the association were Tigreans, half-Tiger and half-Amhara; among them were Girmay Nigussie, Solomon Desta, Gebre-Eyesus Kahissay and Tekele Gebre-Selassie.<sup>146</sup> These founding members from different corners of Gondar met each other in happy or sad times even if they lived in different parts of the town; just like other *iddir* members, the members lived harmoniously. The first founding members were 32; later, the number of members increased.<sup>147</sup> The archival sources tell us that besides Kidus Gabriel and Abune Aregawie relief societies, all ethnic groups who had lived in Gondar and who entered the town at different times for the sake of a better life and other socioeconomic conditions participated in each other's religious, community and professional *iddir*.<sup>148</sup>

### **3.4.3. Social Networking and Insurance**

As many eyewitnesses have testified, being a member of *iddir* means not only carrying out funeral rituals for them but also making them interact with people who are members of the relief association.<sup>149</sup> Since their foundations, the *iddirs* have performed many social responsibilities, apart from burying the dead and comforting the bereaved. For example, when the members of the association were getting married, they made a contribution, sang and danced, and visited married couples when new children were born.<sup>150</sup> The members of the associations treated each other like family. When a member of the association dies, they help the deceased member's family start a business and plan for a sustainable life. They supported each other by donating building materials to the helpless members. These decisions were not affected by the ethnic origins of the members, but were based on humanity.<sup>151</sup>

According to former members of the association, being a member of the *iddir* means getting rid of problems and worries because the association would take care of major social problems. The

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<sup>143</sup>Informant: Lete-Berhan G/Michael.

<sup>144</sup>CGAZA, Abune Aregawi Märrädäja Mahibä, 4.

<sup>145</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup>Informant: Lete-Berhan G/Michael.

<sup>150</sup>Informants: Lete-Berhan G/Michael and Alemitu Degu.

<sup>151</sup>Informant: Alemitu Degu.

members of *iddirs* had lived a beautiful life without any ethnic or religious differences.<sup>152</sup> Members were viewed as family to each other.

#### **3.4.4. Dispute Resolution and Reconciliation**

Just like peaceful interaction, conflict is known to be a characteristic of a society. Apart from religious bodies, Gondar had many indigenous institutions that settled disputes; among them, the *iddir* was the most prominent one.<sup>153</sup> It solved problems and created a peaceful coexistence. When the members of an association get into trouble due to border and daily disagreements, they offer advice to solve the problems through *iddir*.<sup>154</sup> Since in the *iddirs* there were old people who were feared and respected in the area, it created an opportunity to resolve conflicts and chaos.<sup>155</sup> Including simple disagreements and serious conflicts, the *iddir* solved so many cases, even resolving many conflicts in which a killing occurred. Later, the hostile groups forgot what happened between them and built brotherhood like before.<sup>156</sup> Fighting

#### **3.4.5. Information Exchange**

For a long period of time, the *iddirs* of Gondar enabled members to exchange information when they met in monthly meetings for burial, for consolation of a bereaved family, and on other social occasions. The information exchanged covered economic condition, illness, how to recover from illness, which traditional medicine was the best one and general family life.<sup>157</sup>

### **4. Conclusion**

The study gave due attention to examining historical developments and the role of *iddir* in the interaction among different ethno-linguistic groups in Gondar from 1936 to 1994. It tried to reconstruct the genesis and impact of *iddir* on early and recent socio-economic aspects in Gondar. Based on the investigation of all available sources, the researcher has finally come to the following conclusion. Accordingly, *iddirs* are one of the earliest informal social organizations in Gondar, just like the Gurages and people in Gondar began organizing in informal social institutions following the Italian invasion when life became so disorganized. The *iddirs*' main role in their genesis was to bury members in an organized and collective way. However, since they began to be organized formally, which occurred in the early 1960s and late 1970s, the roles of *iddirs* have been beyond those of their earlier roles.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that members of *iddirs* engage in different economic and social activities. The major benefits these informal institutions provide include lessening social and economic burdens, the development of friendship, dispute resolution, sharing

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<sup>152</sup>Informant: Lete-Berhan G/Michael.

<sup>153</sup>Informants: Lete-Berhan G/Michael and Alemitu Degu.

<sup>154</sup>Informant: Alemitu Degu.

<sup>155</sup>Informants: Mulu Shetaye and Alemitu Degu.

<sup>156</sup>Informants: Hidija Jebriel and Hailu Berhane.

<sup>157</sup>Informants: Mulu Shetaye and Alemitu Degu.

information. Particularly, burying the dead and helping the bereaved family played a dominant role for the people of the study area, and it gave the poor a sense of equality with other economically well-off people. Like that, these institutions have had a profound impact on different ethno-linguistic and religious groups' ability to stand together and develop a sense of belongingness and opportunity for their future. However, in recent years, researchers have observed that the early and newly formed *iddirs*' roles of getting people together and incorporating all people from all socio-economic background faced constraints, which might be responsible for the recent social unrest in Gondar, either religiously or politically. This study in general has local and national significance because it tried to show the development and roles of these institutions in creating social cohesion.

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