

Indigenous Voluntary Urban Associations and thereby Community Solidarity among Residents of Debre Markos Town, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Membership to indigenous voluntary urban associations suggest the nature of communalities that members have in terms of their concerns and ways of dealing with them in daily life which can be indicator of the form of community solidarity that would likely exist in the society. The main objective of this paper was to examine the state of voluntary urban associations and thereby community solidarity among residents of Debre Markos town; Ethiopia. Both primary and secondary sources were employed. Household survey and In-depth interviews were the principal means of generating primary data. A total of 384 sample household heads were selected through systematic random sampling. On top of this in depth interview was employed with 18 residents. The survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics where as the qualitative data was analyzed in words to supplement the quantitative data. The findings of this study confirm that a substantial number of the residents of the town are member of the three voluntary associations; Edir, Ekub and Mahiber. These voluntary urban associations are among the mechanisms of maintaining their social and cultural identities of the community and further are important to establish good relationship with members of the community. Due to this it contributes to the maintenance of the longestablished forms of solidarity in the society.

Index terms— community solidarity, voluntary urban associations, indigenous, Debre Markos town.

1 Introduction

In several African societies where the state plays only a limited role in organizing public life, the activities of indigenous or voluntary associations constitute an important aspect of people's life (Nishi, 2008). These self help voluntary associations are the African's own response to the stresses and difficulties they face and became crucial aspects of the coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies (Salole, 1991; Ephrem, 2010). As saving gap is one of the serious problems confronting many developing countries, these associations provide an alternative saving mechanisms through domestic saving thereby help to reduce the lack of finance for investment (Sawani and Patterson, Nd). Moreover, they play a crucial role for sustainable development, especially at local level, by mobilizing resources and regulating their utilization with an outlook of maintaining Author's Lecturer of sociology at Wolaita Sodo University, Wolaita Sodo, Ethiopia. e-mails: desyalewkasahun@gmail.com, muler666@gmail.com a long-term base for productive activities (Mowo et al, 2011).

As the name implies voluntary associations are those organizations whose membership is optional/not obligatory (Bruce and Yearley, 2006). In addition to this, members of the associations have an explicit contract for mutual help in a certain way when well-defined events take place in everyday life (Weerd et al, 2007). Urban associations are those heterogeneous institutions concerned with, regardless of their size, a variety of

activities including community management, social services provision and infrastructure, finance and credit, and religious and social affairs. Their financial source may be from voluntary contributions, membership fees or external funding (Tostensen et al, 2001). Indigenous voluntary associations are a complex of norms, behaviors and accepted roles that last for long by serving valued social function (Alema, 2008). Because of this they serve as a base of social solidarity by providing a sense of belongingness and mutual thrust that member of the society experience in social life. Individuals participate in line with collective norms through which members are expected to participate in group activities accordingly (Elias et al. 2014, Turner 2006).

In Ethiopia, there are a number of indigenous voluntary associations which existed in a variety of forms in different cultural, religious and socio-economic contexts. The first organizations in Ethiopia were selfhelp systems. They existed in the country for centuries before they started to take shape and developed in to some sort of well established structures (Alema, 2008). Among the well known indigenous voluntary associations in Ethiopia includes, Edir, Ekub and Mahiber. Edir is a burial association established based on the mutual agreement of community members to collaborate whenever an adverse situation occur in any member of the family. It has different functions and benefits to its members. For instance, it provides financial, material, labor and emotional support at the time of mourning. Furthermore, some of them have been involving in provision of different social services such as schools and health services, and some are engaged in income generating activities such as consumer goods shop, renting halls and equipment which are mainly found in urban centers (Alema, 2008).

Ekub is a rotating credit association which promotes saving habit of members and provides credit service to members. It is uncommon in the rural areas of Ethiopia. Whereas Mahiber is a religious based association which provides members with support and spiritual satisfaction as they fulfill religious commitments marked by regular feast, and enables them to get together and develop social interaction among the members (Alema, 2008). As the case is for almost all parts of the country, there are voluntary urban associations in Debre Markos town. This paper discusses the three dominant of those associations (Edir, Ekub and Mahiber) which are deeply embedded in the social fabric of the everyday life of the society and their contribution for community solidarity among residents of the town.

2 II.

3 Materials and Methods

Choosing a research method is not about deciding right from wrong or truth from falsehood instead the goal should be to select an approach that is suitable for the task at hand. The selection of research method depends on the nature of what we are trying to describe, the likely accuracy of our descriptions, purposes of the research and on the resources available to us. As clearly stated in Years work (2010), Methodological triangulation is the utilization of several research methods in a single investigation in order to gather relevant data for the study. So this study employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

4 a) Research design

As per the study objectives, a cross-sectional descriptive study design was used where by the data collection process was undertaken at one point in time. The rationale behind selecting this design is that it is possible and appropriate to investigate the state of voluntary urban associations and thereby community solidarity by collecting relevant data at one point in time. Hence, the entire data collection process took place from June 10 to July 15, 2014.

5 b) The research setting

Debre Markos is found 300 kilometers northwest of the country's capital-Addis Ababa and 265 kilometers southeast of the Amhara National Regional State capital-Bahir Dar (Esubalew 2006). Debre Markos is one of the growing towns of Ethiopia with more than 93,000 population size consisting of seven Kebeles and one worada. It was founded 161 years ago by Tedla Gualu, a ruler of Gojjam. In 1845 Dejazmach Tedla founded Menkoror, presently known by Debre Markos; and lived there for nearly three decades. In 1874 the first Church that of Saint Markos was built in Menkoror. Just a year after and onwards, the town got the name Debre Markos after the church of St Markos (Debre Markos City Service as cited in Esubalew 2006).

Regarding the occupational distribution of inhabitants in the town, there are a number of resident who are employed in the civil service, trade, small-scale industries (woodwork, metalwork and so forth), handicrafts (like weaving, and sewing) and a number of other petty businesses. A significant number of households also earn their livelihood by brewing and selling homemade beverages like Tella, Arekie, and Tej. Although Debre Markos is relatively old, historical and has been an important center of administration and commerce of Gojjam province for a long period of time, it has hardly shown any significant development. There is a saying that states "you can go and find the palace of King Teklehaimanot without any trouble" which is a clear indication of long standing stagnation of Debre Markos town. Set of reasons could be ascribed for keeping the status que of the town in its undeveloped state (Esubalew, 2006).

6 c) Participants of the study

The study participants are all urban residents of Debre Markos town of Easter Gojjam zonal administration, Amhara region, Ethiopia.

7 d) Tools of data collection

Household survey and in-depth interview were the principal data collection tools used in the study in order to collect both quantitative and rich qualitative data so that the study objectives can sufficiently be achieved.

8 e) Sampling Procedure

Multi-stage cluster sampling was employed in order to get the final sample households. According to the new administrative arrangement Debre Markos town has 7 Kebeles. In the first stage four (4) Kebeles were randomly selected from seven Kebeles. The Kebeles are further classified in to sub-Kebeles or 'Sefer'. So in the second stage sub-Kebeles or 'Sefer' were randomly selected. This is due the fact that the exhaustive list of households is found under their sub Kebele or 'Sefer'. Accordingly there are five to eight sub-Kebeles under each Kebeles. Hence four sub Kebeles were randomly selected and included in the sample. Finally, in the third stage the households from the randomly selected sub-Kebeles or 'sefer' were included through systematic sampling technique based on the sampling frame of the households which is taken from the respective Kebeles selected in the first stage.

As it is clearly stated in Fowler (2002 as cited in Firew 2010), a standard statistical approach is important to determine the sample size which is appropriate to the study population. The equation is discussed as follows: Accordingly, the size of sample (n) was given by; $n = Z^2 p (1-p) / d^2$, Thus, $=> (1.962)^2 (.5*.5) / (.05)^2 = > 384$

A size of 384 samples is advisable to ensure representativeness for a certain study given that the total population ranges between 10,000 and 100,000. Therefore this sample size was adequate enough to conduct this particular study in Debre Markos town by taking entire households of the town as a unit of analysis.

9 f) Data analysis

The collected data was analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The quantitative data collected through the household survey was analyzed using SPSS software version 20. Data entry and analysis of the survey data was done by the researcher using the SPSS software. This involved entering the questionnaire parameters into the programme and subsequently adding the information from the respondents questionnaires. The information obtained from the in depth interview was analyzed qualitatively together with the quantitative data on the basis of the objective.

10 g) Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance letter was obtained from Addis Ababa University. All the study participants were informed about the purpose of the study and finally their consent was obtained before interview. The information provided by each respondent was kept confidential. The dissemination of the finding did not refer specific respondent.

11 III.

12 Results and Discussion

13 a) Socio demographic characteristics of study participants

Despite the theoretical orientation which depicts urban areas as a center of heterogeneity across different social variables such as ethnicity and religion, the case of Debre Markos town seems different. Given that Ethiopia is home of multi ethnic country with more than 80 ethnic groups, the town is a home of significantly homogeneous people in terms of ethnicity and religion, about 96.9 % and 99% are orthodox Christians and belong to Amhara ethnic group respectively. In addition to this the majority of the surveyed households have 4 to 6 members (52%) and even about 39.3% have household size of less than 3 members. The majority of surveyed households can be judged as medium sized household (whose household members are from 4-6). It is only 8.3 % of the total surveyed households whose household size is greater than seven household members. b) The state of voluntary urban associations i. Edir

The finding of the survey data revealed that 83.9% of the respondents are members of Edir (burial association) and the remaining 16.1% are not. Hence the significant majority of respondents are member of Edir. Non members are those either who are living in extreme poverty or new comers who are not settled yet and familiar with the existing neighborhood interaction. Since the researcher is from this area and also confirmed by the data gathered through in depth interview the support that neighbors offer to one another upon death of a member goes beyond the scope of that Edir requires. The neighbors accompany the households whose relative is deceased for many evenings and during weekends in view of relaxing and morally supporting the household members under mourning. Studies confirmed that Edir brings together the poor and well off households although when it comes to practical things one can still see clear differentiation. The poor households involve in Edir in real sense-meeting all requirements like monthly contributions and actively participate in duties related to death and

funeral. However, the wells to do people undertake everything financially such as they pay money for absence of regular meetings.

ii. Mahiber Unlike membership to Edir in which most of them are members, membership to mahiber shows a large variation between members and non members. The data in the table 2 elaborates that 55.2% of the respondents are member of Mahiber where as the remaining (44.8%) are not. Regardless of the socio economic status of the households and given that the significant majority of them are orthodox Christianity religious followers, membership to Edir seems more important than Mahiber. Thus member ship to Mahiber (religious association) seems adversely affected these days since continuous feasts are dominant feature of rural areas particularly those societies who are dominantly orthodox Christians. But the changing life style of urban areas is known by its rationality in terms of the household's socio economic conditions in relation to consumption, saving and expenditure. So that feasts are mainly taken as extravagant practices.

iii. Ekub Ekub can be understood as family or locality based saving associations that provide members bereavement insurance. Regarding membership to ekub, the table 2 demonstrates that almost half of the respondents are members and the rest half are not. There is only a slight difference that members are 51% and non members are 49%. When we go down and see the pattern from membership Edir, Mahiber and Ekub, the number of non members increased and it is only membership to Edir which remains very important to them. When we see Ekub, it seems that modern emerging financial institutions are playing the role of this local organization and people no more view Ekub as only one which can give financial function in this particular period of time. The possible explanation is that people are no more relay on ekub for its traditional financial function rather modern emerging financial institutions are replacing overtime. This is clearly indicated on the survey data that revealed that only half of the respondents are member of ekub. Most of those who are member of Ekub spent five to thirty birr in a weekly basis which seems that this customary voluntary institution is serving as a social function or as an expression of social tie rather than its previous economic role.

14 c) Community solidarity

Sociologists from the very beginning were concerned about the form of social order and solidarity which will come along with industrialization and urbanization process. Many, though not all, of their contributions focused on a sustained search for social reforms that countered the socially destabilizing effects of the process of urbanization and industrialization contrary to revolutionary thinkers who sought to bring a more radical. The prominent among them is that of Emile Durkheim who succulently elaborated the concept (Oosterlynck and Bouchaute, 2013).

Community solidarity can be understood by the quantity and quality of inter personal ties that a particular society reinforces among its members. These social ties reflect social resources that are instrumental in supporting psychological, physical and social well being. Having strong social ties serves as a buffer against vulnerability to risk. One of its manifestations is membership to indigenous voluntary organizations or associations. This section highlights how the residents of the town are interconnected in the form of membership to indigenous voluntary association such as Edir, Mahiber and Ekub. This will be an indicator of how indigenous voluntary associations are looking like given that the size and level of urbanization is increasing over time. In addition to this the perception of respondents regarding their relationship with their neighbors can also be one indicator of how strong their interaction is. Regardless of their membership to different local social organizations, most view their interaction with their neighborhood differently which indicated their sense of attachment. The data indicated in table 3 demonstrated that 35.9% of the respondents viewed their relationship with their neighbors as very strong, 19.5% view as it is strong, for 24.7% it is medium and the remaining 19.8% viewed it as weak. From these one can understand that around 80 % of the respondents perceive their relationship with their neighbors as either very strong, strong and medium. Only around 19 % of them respond as they have weak relationship with their neighbors. This might be viewed from two directions. The first is the result of high degree of homogeneity so that membership to social networks seems social responsibility and non membership might have many social costs. On the other hand, an increase in the size of the society increase impersonality and decrease the degree of contact among members of the society as one basic feature of urbanism or urban life. This statement is strongly supported by the idea of Wirth in his famous theory of urbanism as a way of life. To sum up Membership in community organizations such as Idir (funeral associations), ekub (saving/credit groups), and mahiber (religious groupings) is the basic feature of most households holding the fact that there is high degree of homogeneity in terms of religion and language. However, nowadays the changing life style started to affect some of these organizations negatively, particularly Ekub and Mahiber. Only Edir seems more important to most of the respondents except few who have resigned and cease participate in Edir due to economic factors and their failures to meet their obligations.

15 d) Discussion

This study, which aimed to examine the state of indigenous voluntary urban associations and thereby community solidarity, brings to light some previously unexplored issues by employing relevant theoretical orientation. Wirth (1938) asserted that urbanism or urbanization produced any of several important social consequences among people. These are impersonality and anonymity in everyday life, loss of trust among people and various forms of

social disorganization, as in higher rates of crime than in rural areas. However the central focus of the theoretical argument was about the nature of urbanization, the metropolis, in particular, which might be very difficult to directly apply it on urban centers of the less developed countries including Debre Markos town. But still one can view some aspects of an urban center with the help of this theoretical ground given that the influence of globalization is very high everywhere with different magnitude. This helps to appreciate the changes observed in Debre Markos town as one manifestation of the social consequences of urbanism unlike rural settings where more or less homogeneous in every sphere of life. Particularly Ethiopian urbanization is more or less indigenous than other African countries who had had gone through some colonial experience. This helps to preserve the previous socio cultural structure. This argument is very true particularly when we look at the limitations of wirth's theory which have been pointed out by its critics. First and foremost, this theoretical school suffers from lack of cross-cultural perspective. The Chicago sociologists were responding to one kind of city. They were looking at the North American city moving into the high gear of industrialization. The neglect of historical or crosscultural comparisons limited the significance of their work.

On the other hand wirth also argued that these variations should give rise to the spatial segregation of individuals according to color, ethnic heritage, economic and social status, tastes and preferences, may readily be inferred. Because of this the bonds of kinship, neighborliness, and the sentiments arising out of living together for generations under a common tradition are likely to be absent or, at best, relatively weak. Under such circumstances competition and formal control mechanisms furnish the substitutes for the bonds of solidarity that are relied upon to hold a folk society together. None of the above statements directed by wirth are working in Debre Markos town even though the town is far from being a metropolitan center.

The degrees of social interaction or relationship residents have with their neighbors and membership to indigenous voluntary urban associations didn't show any significant decline in relation to the growing process of urbanization. All the rest explanations in association to the special segregation based on color and ethnic group is not the characteristics of Debre Markos town due to the high degree of homogeneity and the size of the town.

IV.

16 Conclusion

The significant homogeneity of residents in terms of religion and ethnicity reinforces strong sense of belongingness and solidarity in the urban context despite the country is known as an ethnic museum due to the existence of more than eighty ethnic groups. In addition to membership to voluntary associations, Feeling of neighborhoodness is very recommendable. Such voluntary associations are strong enough to preserve the traditional form of solidarity as a means to hold on together even though the trend is towards rapid urbanization process in the town and the influence of globalization. Other studies also confirmed that membership in community organizations such as Edir (funeral associations), Ekub (saving/credit groups) and Mahiber (religious groupings) is indispensable for lowincome households because it represents a dependable social security arrangement. Due to this such associations will remain important as most are characterized as low income households.

Year 2015 (H) ¹

1

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Religion	Orthodox	372	96.9
	Muslim	6	1.6
	Protestant	6	1.6
	Total	384	100
Ethnicity	Amhara	380	99
	Tigre	4	1
	Total	384	100
Household size	<=3	151	39.3
	4 -6 7 -9 10 -12	200 23 10	52.1 6 2.6
	Total	384	100

Figure 1: Table 1 :

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2

Membership voluntary urban associations	Category Frequency Percentage		
Edir	Yes	322	83.9
	No	62	16.1
	Total	384	100
Mahiber	Yes	212	55.2
	No	172	44.8
	Total	384	100
Ekub	Yes	196	51.0
	No	188	49.0
	Total	384	100

Figure 2: Table 2 :

3

Own rating neighborhood relationship	Category Frequency Percentage		
	very strong	138	35.9
	Strong Medium Weak	75 95 76	19.5 24.7
			19.8
	Total	384	100

Figure 3: Table 3 :

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