

Review

Mahebär: Dynamics of a social self-help association

Abraha Weldu

Department of History and Cultural Studies of Mekelle University, Ethiopia.

Received 17 August, 2016; Accepted 8 November, 2016

The paper examines the dynamics of a socio-religious self-help association by looking at the celebration of Mahebär, a religious-oriented association, in Adi Ei'rä, Ethiopia. Mahebär is an indigenous socio-religious organization of individuals who pledge as members to treat one another as equals. It is dedicated to honor a particular sacred religious figure. Like Equb and Edir, Mahebär is by far the most important social organization that has partly eased the social, gender and ethnic polarities in the community. The finding shows that Mahebär is not only a source of fraternity and sorority in the community, but also takes into account the notion of development and gender equality. Mahebär allows both men and women to form separate organization in order to find support, affirmation, and enjoyment in the comfort of persons of their own gender. Under the umbrella of the socio-religious association, women managed to express themselves freely in a way that they could not display in public. They also pledged to help each other in time of need. Since members are expected to raise funds that will be utilized for the monthly festivity. In the process, Mahebär incubates the concept of saving and mutual assistance in the community. It plays a key role in generating specific self-help associations and fosters a high degree of generalized reciprocity between members. Mahebär is a lasting and germane socio-economic organization that contributes to socio-political dynamics in the society.

Key words: Mahebär, reciprocity, feast, Socio-Religious Association.

INTRODUCTION

In this parish, the community members were initiated into a traditional risk managing schemes. Farmers were said to have considerably relied on these indigenous systems of social corporation mechanism than other formal institutions. In this regard, the foremost ecclesiastical institutions including *Mahebär* and later¹

stand out as substantial local and informal self-help associations. These, together with other institutions, the secular institution, *Eder*, church have likewise provided the necessary values to promote mutual assistance in the community. In fact, as it was observed in the village, the farmers are also employed in on off-farming

¹ For details on *Edir* and *Equb*, please consult the work of Kasahun D, Mulugeta B (2015). 'Indigenous Voluntary Urban Associations and thereby Community Solidarity among Residents of Debre Markos Town, Ethiopia.'

The Global Journal of Human-Social Science: H Interdisciplinary, 15(10). pp.19-21.

E-mail: abraha14@gmail.com.

Authors agree that this article remain permanently open access under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

activities as wage-laborers to deal with temporal financial hardships. Due to the opportunity of off-farming works, farmers regularly travel to nearby towns like Wuqro to seek supplementary income after the completion of the task of harvesting. With the introduction of community-based environmental rehabilitation program, a safety net project, the farmers have devoted a certain number of work-days to the program.²

Broadly speaking, the term *Mahebär* may refer roughly as a voluntary association that tends to bring together individuals for both ritual and secular purpose. With the social dynamism and the development of capitalist economy, *Mahebär* precisely evolved into different means and usages, for which a reciprocal relationship becomes more visible in the urban life. Membership funds are expected, and the income often spent on projects that would benefit the members. Therefore, it laid the ground for the foundation and generation of traditional self-help associations that have retained their own distinct functional and regional features. This is practically true with reference to *Edir*, that established by neighbors with the purpose of fund raising for emergency. The association mostly has kept on many of the basic principles of *Mahebär*.³

In this study, the discussion starts with a normative description of components and procedures of *Mahebär* in general as practiced in Adi Ei'ra. In order to show briefly how the organization inspires women's participation and bring development to the community, the paper gives a detailed sketch of the social and economic aspects of the institution. It argues that *Mahebär* is time-tested umbrella for social cohesion and economic interdependence among the farming community. More importantly, it serves as life-affirming institution that has partly assisted members to develop a sense of togetherness.⁴ In this regard, few scholars argue that *Mahebär* is a locally generated self-help association that provides critical and reciprocal benefits to members. This is basically true with the case of *Eder*, a local self-help organization, deliberately established to address emergency situation among members.⁵

Mahebär

In farming community, the church is the center of their social activities. The community in many cases constituted itself in order to address its concerns by establishing religious-oriented organizations. In order to

attain social respect in the community, an individual has to be bound by the social norms and join any of the indigenous religious-oriented self-help associations. It is said that one's belongingness is demonstrated through membership in sacral activities of the parish such as *Mahebär* and *Sänbät Sänabti* (honoring the first Sunday of each month). In most cases, such organizations are considered as practically important for the good of the community. Indeed, joining a *Mahebär* to honor a particular saint or angel is voluntary decision of individuals. There is significant latitude for the farmers residing in the parish to select a *Mahebär*. The association is deemed necessary to address class, gender and other social distinctions and encourage members to make improvements on their relationships.⁶

The church of Adi Ei'ra has its own patron saint which is believed to be responsible for the welfare of the community. The number and identities of locally observed saints are based on the accord made between the parish community and senior priests of the church. In many instances, however, the need to add and drop saints from the calendar took place after a lengthy meeting in the church yard.⁷ In the parish, individuals often select to celebrate a particular saint or an angel that has personal importance to them through membership in the *Mahebär*, a voluntary religious-oriented association. In practice, *Mahebär* is consisted of twelve members who make monthly contact for spiritual and worldly purposes simultaneously in honoring of their favored saint.⁸ Once this informal self-help institution is firmly established, each *Mahebär* retains its own specific name depending on the preference of members.⁹ A *Mahebär* which is enthusiastic to honor a sacred religious figure, 'just like the twelve apostles,' concurrently uses the organization to deal with economic and social wellbeing of the community.

In Adi Ei'ra, what constitutes a membership is often based on the saint being celebrated. For female saints, such as *Kedsti Maryam* and *Kedsti Arsema*, *Mahebär* is established mainly by women. Honoring of sacred days, such as Sunday which members meet at the first Sunday of each month, and for male saints such as *Aba Gaber*

² The overall description is based on the primary observation and interviews that took place on Monday, May 31, 2016, in Adi Ei'ra.

³ Siegbert, *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, p.650.

⁴ In this paper, I have focused on prime function of *Mahebär* with reference to the Adi Ei'ra residents.

⁵ Siegbert, *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, pp.649-650.

⁶ In order to bring a representative description, this study has attempted to use local terms as much as possible. In many cases, some basic terms like *Tsäbäl*, is improperly translated by scholars and may have lost its literal meanings. For details see, for instance Donham L (1994). 'An Archaeology of Work Among the Maale of Ethiopia.' The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 29 (1). London: Royal Anthropological Institute. p.157.

⁷ On the complexity of honoring of Saints' Day, a fine analysis has already been given by Hendrie, 'Now the People Are Like', pp.211-212.

⁸ The discussion is based on the researcher's exposure in the study area and for details on the general concept of social stratification and interdependence in Tigray consult Bauer D (1973). 'Land, Leadership and Legitimacy among the Inderta Tigray of Ethiopia,' PhD Dissertation in Social Anthropology. Michigan State University Press. pp.128-130.

⁹ Bevan, Pankhurst, 'Ethiopian Village Studies', p.29; Elleni T, *Sankofa: African Thought*, p.57.

and *Kidus Mikael*, both males and females become regular members. Among the farming community, membership in *Mahebär* is said to have minimized requirements of recruitment and it is open to all the neighborhoods and villages. It is often formed based on a good spirit of individuals; nevertheless it steadily inculcates the concept of fraternity within and outside the *Mahebär*. This social association presumably sought to narrow down social differences and has encouraged a culture of reciprocal relationships in the community. This is perhaps a reflection of the community efforts to ease inevitable economic and social challenges.¹⁰ In most cases, the institution also provides assistance to destitute members, solacing the bereaved, and resolving conflicts.

It is possible to say that *Mahebär* retains an egalitarian objective in this relatively less hierarchal community. More specifically, there has been an approximate equalization of gender involvement in the institution. There is no single member or other kind of gender group capable of achieving an extra right or privilege in *Mahebär*. Instead it is an institution in the village that explicitly takes into account all sex groups to maintain an equal status. Indeed, some rich households in the parish strive to gain a better position in many of the social activities. For example, these social groups tend to prepare a large feast, upon their monthly turns, and invite the parish community to eat and drink thereby maintaining social influence in return. In the context of *Mahebär*, the magnitude of social disparity of the poor and rich members becomes less apparent and more sociable.¹¹

Mahebär has a tendency to push for networking and cross-parish social interactions. This is perhaps reflected in the members' preference to set up *Mahebär* with diverse neighborhoods.¹² It has long been known that members of the same family bound to different *Mahebärs* and offsprings mostly replace their parents thereby ensuring the continuity of the already laid down social affiliation. It offers social identity for individuals who could not otherwise have a relationship with one another particularly by virtue of kinship.¹³ One possible exception is, in most part, that the *Zäma* (sister's husband or wife's brother) has made good members. It is acceptable for relations with one's *Zäma* to be intimate, collective and supportive. The first possible reason for non-kinship tendency of the association is to deal with the

contravening relationships among the farming community on the limited resources within or outside the parish. Members who come from different parishes contribute to cross-parish interactions that encompass a lot of people. Therefore, *Mahebär* is a setting in which members without kinship relationships generate bonds of mutual assistance.

In terms of self-interest, an individual gets a reputation for being upright, and for being able to participate in many *Mahebär*. As it is constituted to be a sort of ritual affirmation, it has a substantial value without which the communities have no binding value.¹⁴ The degree of corporateness, togetherness and its basis is firmly strong in the community. The community has been corporate for several factors, including the dynamism of resource principles that somewhat affect the farmers. While the community interests are distinguished as often being divergent, the ecclesiastical associations partly discouraged the immorality and unreasonableness of members, acting against the communal well-being. Normally, the relationships among members have been cooperativeness and mutual supportiveness. There is a great deal of interest to maintain mutual belongingness and respect among the people of parish.

Celebration of *Mahebär*

As already noted, all saints are not honored equally. Instead, each individual observes a slightly different saint's day. Among the *Adi Ei'rä* community, the most important saint is *Kedsti Maryam*, the patron saint of the village for which the *Tawot* (the Covenant) within the church is dedicated. The day of St. Mary falls on the 21st of each month and on the 21st of *Hidar* (November) each year in Ethiopian calendar. To ensure the continued auspice and compassion of St. Mary, the community often celebrates the day. Honoring the patron saint of the village, and what the community believes to be the guarantor or witness of every soul, was deemed important by my informants. Without it, as one of them states, the communities have thought to be vulnerable to misfortune, conceivably evident in the form of a localized natural disaster.¹⁵

Essentially, the *Kedsti Maryam Mahebär* is a religious-oriented ceremony dedicated to the saint by combined supplicatory prayers of members. In this regard, the association has often assembled people from faraway parishes. My informants point out that *Mahebär* has been

¹⁰ One of my informants point out that rarely to qualify as a potential member of a *Mahebär*, a person should has to establish an independent household. Indeed, social and economic factors are not basically used as a criterion that usually tend individuals to retain a marginal status.

¹¹ Due to its Christian scene, *Mahebär* is overwhelmingly a religious institution. However, still informants reveal that non-Christina believers reside in a separate quarter have been entertained by vegetarian foods to assist inter-religious societal solidarity in the parish.

¹² Bevan, Pankhurst, 'Ethiopian Village, p. 29.

¹³ Bauer, 'Land, Leadership and Legitimacy, p. 121.

¹⁴ Only having membership in several *Mahebär*'s does not guarantee social respect, however, it assist individuals to introduce themselves with many others and to maintain social support at any time in the parish.

¹⁵ The overall description is based on the primary observation and interviews that took place on Monday, May 31, 2016. For details on the annual religious holidays and fasts, see for instance Hendrie, 'Now the People Are Like, p.334.

constituted by twelve individuals, one for each month to host the program once each year. In the annual celebration, the priests and deacons in the parish have often made lengthy prayers to the patron saint, *Kedsti Maryam*. Likewise, in the hosting house, women spent the whole night in prayers, occasionally accompanied by dances and ululating sounds. During this ceremony not only the members of the *Mahebär* attend but sometimes neighborhoods and relatives could join the ceremony.

It appears that in the present time the celebration of *Mahebär* is thought to begin in the morning and ends at sunset. Members arrive from the outlying parishes and assembled in the church before ascending into the hosting house. The *Abbat Näfsi* (Father of the Soul), the priest who performs confession for the member and *Zaqunay* (deacon) have to offer prayers and bless the food. When all members have assembled in the hosting house, members pray together and extended their gratitude to their creator for the opportunity to share the moment. Then, the spiritual leader would open the celebration by conducting mass. The mass includes praises and supplication of the honoring saint, *Kedsti Maryam*. In this joyful time, now and then, the mass is accompanied by women's ululation. Here, the members are called to abide by the guarantor, *Wäladitā Amlak* (Mother of the God Almighty), and to stay steadfast in their loyalty. The explanations given by priest attribute to the significance of respecting the instruction of God, and keeping the integrity and unity of the parish. Further, the priest father instructs the members using biblical verse readings and explanations to set out feelings of respect, brotherhood and sisterhood, and empathy towards each other. The mentoring of *Mahebär* is important for the integration of an individual into the community.

In the mass prayers, guided by the priest, everyone kneels down, bows the head and keeps praying the *Tāwākā*. *Tāwākā* is a Ge'ez word, which in turn, refers to the wishes of the prayers to partake in blessing. The priest has continued to recount the scriptural and non-scriptural stories to emphasize the value of fraternity and mutuality in the people. At the same time, members share the calls of mutual achievements through membership in the informal self-help association. After the completion of the praise and benediction, the members severed in *Das*, a temporary roof made of leaf branches and woods, used to cover a space where the occasion is held. Here, *Himbasha* (bread) and sometimes *Tayta* (a flat pancake) is offered to the members. The spiritual leader blesses the meal through prayers of *Bäsm Ab Wäld Mānfās Kudu Ahadu Amalk* (in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God). Hereafter, while the women take part in serving the food and *Tsäbhi* (a sauce served with the flat bread), men pours the *Sewa* (beer) into the guests *Wancha* or glasses.

The food and drink, thought to be sacred, have no standard preparation in contrast to other local feasts such as *Degis*. In *Degis*, where every head of rich households

prepared elaborate food for social and political purpose, the meal is well prepared and greatly enjoyed.¹⁶ However, *Mahebär* basically considers the economic capacity of members and the sponsorship usually rotates from the house of one member to another. This is deliberately made in order to distribute the funds allocated for the ceremony and to resolve if disputes occur among the members. In a state of deep-seated ill-will, the people of *Adi Ei'ra* keep off from entering their opponent quarter. However, the rotational system of *Mahebär* allows the member to mitigate the antagonism. In *Mahebär*, a state of reconciliation is expected to be reached among disputing parties before the date of the feast program.

At the end of the service, the so-called *Me'entā Dengel Maryam Ziwāhasāni* (in the name of the Virgin Mary who will act as guarantor), ceremony is held. It is a program that intended to select a sponsoring member. People who wish to host, pour a drop of sacred beer (*Sewa*) to the initiator, who mentioned the honoring figure. The individual is thought to get the blessings and companion of the sacred religious figure. In addition to personal wish of sponsoring system, *Mahebär* follows a mechanism through which a general discussion of issues of pertaining to the members is considered. In the later, an effort is made in considering the economic capacity of the next sponsor to decide the next organizer of the monthly event. Rich members usually pot to host the program before the task of harvesting and the poor ones after harvesting. Similarly, my informants state that a newly established household is not expected to host in the early months of the marriage. Possibly for this reason that the new household perhaps cannot afford the economic costs that the ceremony entails. In addition, so far it is not clear if the couple stay together. However, if the new household shows a firm interest to host the program, the fellow members are expected to bring food that will be used during the feast. Through these mechanisms, *Mahebär* become the most effective and efficient socio-economic bonding mechanism of the people that had undergone assorted local dynamics.

In some cases, few economically well-established members have made a well-prepared meal. One must not forget that the fundamental principle of *Mahebär* is to host and support only members. In the feast, members have commonly used *Himbasha* (bread) and *Siwa* (beer) to deal with the cost of the feast. Further, in their turn, poor members are encouraged to prepare only *Tsäbhi*, made from ground pulses mixed with spices and oil, and local beer for the ceremony. In order to minimize the costs, the guests commonly come to the event with their own food. Then during the mass prayers that is being undertaken unto the honoring saint, members call to be

¹⁶ In *Mahebär*, it is entirely different from the ceremonial meal party for many people, locally known as *Degis*. As one of my informants point out, in part, they joined *Mahebär* to address social and economic issues of the parish.

faithful to their chosen saint and men to forgive. In order to bring moral values among members, the priest has a power to make a *Gizet*, a formal injunction. This is made against certain types of unacceptable behavior, such as quarreling, lying and cheating. Therefore, *Mahebär* helps us to see the act of reciprocity and application of moral principles in the local dynamics where things are actively changed. In line, it brought important values that are a replica of the biblical instruction in the community.

In *Mahebär*, however, the bonding friendship is not limited to social affirmation. In addition, there are also bonds of friendship among the members who particularly encourage a sort of economic and social interdependence. Members are good at providing favor and help in times of need. For example, one of my informants recount that he was a *Wahes*, a guarantor who called upon the witness in case of crime, for one of his fellow member. In many cases, members show their close intimacy which in turn brings a sort of interdependence. In this regard, there is a high degree of economic reciprocity between individuals, who are bounded by *Mahebär*. In *Mahebär*, members are pledged to help each other and somehow it serves as a loan mechanism¹⁷ when a member faces shortage of capital equipment such as an ox. They also invented a strategy to address unforeseen social and economic emergency. Members have provided labor service in rebuilding a house destroyed by accidental fire. They are also good source of seed-lending in time of crop failure. This kind of mentoring relationship, in the local dynamics, can be seen as one good instance of mutual interdependence partly due to uneven economic circumstance.

The developmental tendency of *Mahebär* is apparent as members pledge to raise funds for the communal projects. For example, when the members plan to buy an item such as *Qämish*, a traditional cloth, to wear on the celebration day, they would save money through the *Qusequs*.¹⁸ *Qusequs* is an indigenous fund raising mechanism which can be glossed as 'contributing for communal projects.' The raised funds would be spent on projects beneficial to the spiritual community. Indeed, *Qusequs* was carried out in kind until the development of modern banking. The system, however, partly encourages a reciprocal relation between interdependent entities (individuals or groups). By taking this as a firm evident, (Uhlig, 2007), even goes as far as to argue that *Mahebär* has generated many self-help associations with distinct regional forms.¹⁹ The social need for more

reciprocity in part has emerged in other informal institutions like *Edir*. *Eder*, which is a secular institution, shares many of the basic components and principles of *Mahebär*. Membership in one congregation usually overlaps with membership in the other and, thus people can belong to *Edir* and *Mahebär* at the same time.

Obviously, few scholars recognize the importance of *Mahebär* in affirming social life²⁰ among the rural community. As already noted, the points of discussion in *Mahebär* often take into account moral values. These values explicitly illustrate biblical explanations and instructions.

In the program, a bible is brought and passages are cited with reference to the good and bad deeds. By respecting the values of *Mahebär*, it is deemed in the explanation of my informants that they become 'under the auspice and support of the saint being honored.' In contrast, disobedience of the guardian saint implies that they would fail to attain the help of the saint. A member who violated or disobeyed the sacred religious figure is going to face harsh criticism from the Church and *Mahebär*. Therefore, *Mahebär* also serves as a source of propagating moral and spiritual values, which are partly essential to bring the values of self-esteem in the community.

In the parish, there are few social organizations that encourage societal integration, without neglecting gender equality. For women, in most part, market days, coffee ceremonies and *Mahebär* enable them to get together and to have a discussion on personal and communal matters. In Adi Ei'ra, there is a tradition of inviting neighbors to a cup of coffee in order to strengthen once social bond with others. By far *Mahebär* is one of the most important breakthroughs for women to find free space and avoid of men's domination. Many of the societal integration are significantly achieved through *Mahebär*.

In the parish where women mostly assume a marginal status in public affairs, *Mahebär* offers the group to find support and affirmation that basically match their own gender. It contributes, as means of social empowerment of women to get together for a while to escape their burden; even it is just for a short while.²¹

Therefore, *Mahebär* plays a key role in generating gender equality in the people. In view of fact, there is no other institution that minimizes the marginal role of

¹⁷ The word *Mahebär* in Tigrigna is a noun form, derived from *Mitehebebar* which refers to co-operate among the people. For example, see also the definitions given by Bauer, *Land, Leadership and Legitimacy*, p.122; Hendrie, 'Now the People Are Like a Lord'-Local Effects, p. 312.

¹⁸ In some parts of Tigray, *Qusequs* is practiced even outside *Mahebär* in order to minimize or share costs of projects for mutual purpose.

¹⁹ Siegbert, *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, pp.649-650.

²⁰ As Elleni states, among the Amhara Wolloye there is no dichotomy concerning the 'spiritual' and 'secular' values and thoughts. Likewise, the values of *Mahebär* are not only applicable to religious but to secular purpose as well. For details on the Amara Thoughts see Elleni, *Sankofa: African Thought*, p.58.

²¹ Dessalegn R, Aklilu K (1999). 'Consultations with the Poor.' *World Development Report 2000/1 on Poverty and Development*. Addis Ababa. pp.23-25; Tony K (2013), 'Religion and social cohesion in Ethiopia,' *International J. of Peace and Development Studies*. p.52.

women.²² It is with the context of *Mahebär* ascribes active roles in such communities. For example, in the meeting, the members regardless of social differences are equally valued and favored. In women's *Mahebär* such as *Kedsti Maryam*, it not only allows them social privileges but also substantially plays down the framework of women dependence to men. They separately pass decisions and share their sentiments with their fellow members; *Däki Maryamäy*. In the women's *Mahebär*, a woman is capable of forming a strong alliance, a connection based on common interest. In addition, the association permits her to express her view, sing and joke in a free manner and in a way that she could not perform in the public. Using this advantage, she articulates her feelings freely and pledges to support other member in need. Therefore, under the umbrella of *Mahebär*, the marginal status of women is partly challenged.

In Adi Ei'rä, *Mahebär* is not only limited to reciprocity and social bonds but also important in social and economic organizations of the parish. We have two basic reasons for this. First, membership in *Mahebär* is often informally recognized individuals as full-fledged members of the parish. Second, that is more central to the economic cases, in the issue of land claim particularly if an individual donate gifts to the church. In Adi Ei'rä, the most common systems of land acquisition included the principle of lineage and residency in the parish. In these ambilineal property rights, both genders have equal access to land. However, an ambilineal descent without social engagement of persons in the parish will not ensure them the right to land. Consequently, the parish residents prefer to get actively involved in the local church activities as well as in *Mahebär* as dues paying members and as adherents to the patron saint, respectively. This is not to say, however, that *Mahebär* is the sole criteria for land claim but rather it provides full legitimacy and residency in the parish.

Aside from an initial attempt of devaluing *Mahebär*, the military transitional government known as *Derg* partly used it to publicize the newly introduced social policies. An example was the attempt of the cadres to bring a lasting effect on family planning and early marriage. As my informants point out, in the years after the fall of the *Derg*, the EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front) was also more vocal to bring gender equality through the informal associations. By the time, many of the indigenous informal institutions were used as mechanisms to bring progressive societal outlook on the issue. Further, *Mahebär* also appeared as a strong institution to unravel women's hidden tragedy of physical and emotional abuse at home. Despite its success, it is

restricted as an adjunct to legal institutions and got involved in rendering counsels to household victims. Therefore, the desire of women to *Mahebär* was important in exposing the violence against women as well as to bringing the abuses to justice.

As already stated, the bond of *Mahebär* reflects a state of reciprocity with the intent of helping members in need. Members of the same *Mahebär* are expected to attend in each other funerals, weddings and christenings. In the association, members are also required to provide labor support on a reciprocal basis for tasks such as house-building. More importantly, to address socio-economic challenges, members have invented a banking scheme in order to address social emergency. Members who failed to fulfill these tasks are ostracized and sometimes their privileges may be withdrawn. *Mahebärs* are first respondents in time of emergency.²³ Consequently, the members successfully maintain the social obligation for the continuity of their social bonding. In social emergency such as *Hazän*, where members expected to cover expenses and to console the grieved family at least for the first three days, that is, the wake period, *Mahebär* stands out as life-affirming institution. In the following day, they have to bring *Däbäs*, a gift either in kind or cash that would offer to a grieving household. In marriage, men are assisted in making *Das*, a temporary roof for the occasion, while women are engaged in preparing food and drink. By carrying out these social obligations, the members are secured a reciprocal support for each other. Therefore, through the communal work of *Mahebär*, members' inclination towards social bond is said to be heightened.

Informants recount about the emergence of anti-*Mahebär* policy soon after the taking over of the power by the Military Government. The government questioned the religious activities of the citizens. It is objected to their ritual activities in relation to saints. Farmers know when to take care of their agricultural activities. Time management is not an issue for them.²⁴ These groups regard that natural disasters and poor land management were sources of less productivity in the parish. Other related problems, such as erratic rainfall, war and heavy taxation discourage high rate of production. Government cadres as well as some NGOs regard holiday and the related expenses as an impairment of work habits and wealth accumulation. The people do not agree and find the accusation groundless.

In due course, the parish community agreed to honor ritual days associated with the patron saint of the parish. Celebrating other religious figures was basically made

²² Elleni, in her discussion about the Amara Thought, observes similar opportunity of *Mahebär* among the Wolloye of Wuchale. For details, see Elleni T, *Sankofa: African Thought*, p. 57.

²³ *Mahebär* is antidote to the gap between rich and poor members. It is a traditional social institution that encourages cooperation and reciprocity.

²⁴ Some of my informants have made plans for an activity or event. Their time arrangement is properly schedule in accordance to the calendar of Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

according to the preference of individuals. Such compromise on the part of the community disappeared as soon as the political pressure died out. The secular and non-secular institutions, refrain from formal instigation on the ritual matters. The debate of the parish, due to polarized group interest, had somehow posed a threat to *Mahebär*. The move to change the religious practice more generally, however, remained ineffective. In practice, *Mahebär* had substantially emerged as the most lasting, efficient and appropriate socio-economic institutions among the farming community. It also illustrates both the importance of the informal self-help association among the parish community and how it fits the local and national challenges. In general, it remained as one of the most important elements for the solidarity, reciprocity and productivity among the people of Adi Ei'rä.

CONCLUSION

The preliminary findings of this study illustrate that *Mahebär* is an indigenous religious or secular organization of individuals who pledge to treat one another as equals. It is dedicated to celebrating a particular sacred religious figure. In the traditional society where social hierarchy was evident, *Mahebär* has appeared as a life-tested informal organization for the collective social networking. It is one of the most important enduring and germane socio-economic associations that foster cross parish interactions for mutual assistance. In practice, it takes into account not only the societal bond but also enhances women's participation in social affairs and maintains developmental orientation.

To affirm the values of a reciprocal relationship, members usually keep in mind the biblical notion of brotherhood and sisterhood and the sentiments of mutual assistance. *Mahebär* has made a great deal of contribution in countermanding the marginal status of women, and in integrating the community regardless of social distinctions. Likewise, the organization has allowed men and women to organize themselves separately and it creates opportunity for the privileged to gain support, affirmation, and celebration that fits both gender. *Mahebär* has entirely retained the developmental orientations and it encourages members to raise funds for projects that benefit the religious community. Above all, it has built a social bridge and has developed capabilities to support people; often members in need

have been effectively assisted with their economic problems thereby building a strong community.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

REFERENCES

- Ayele B (2008). The Ethiopian Millennium and Its Historical and Cultural Meanings. *Int. J. Ethiop. Stud.* 3(2):23-31.
- Bauer F (1973). Land, Leadership and Legitimacy among the Inderta Tigray of Ethiopia. PhD Dissertation in Social Anthropology, Michigan State University.
- Bevan P, Alula P (1996). 'Ethiopian Village Studies: Gelen Wored.' Center for the study of African economy.
- Dessalegn R, Aklilu K (1999). 'Consultations with the Poor.' World Development Report 2000/1 on Poverty and Development: National report, Ethiopia.
- Donham L (1994). An Archaeology of Work among the Maale of Ethiopia. Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. 29(1):147-159.
- Elleni T (1995). Sankofa: African Thought and Education. New York: Peter Lang.
- Hendrie B (1999). Now the People Are Like a Lord'-Local Effects of Revolutionary Reform in a Tigray Village, Northern Ethiopia. PhD Dissertation in Anthropology.
- Karbo T (2013). 'Religion and social cohesion in Ethiopia,' *Int. J. Peace. Dev. Stud.* pp. 44-52.
- Kasahun D, Mulugeta B (2015). Indigenous Voluntary Urban Associations and thereby Community Solidarity among Residents of Debre Markos Town, Ethiopia. *Glob. J. Human-Social Sci. Res.* 15(10):17-22.
- Uhlig S (2007). *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, 3. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.