Exploring *iddir*
Toward Developing a Contextual Theology of Ethiopia

Solomon Dejene

The aim of this paper is to get insight into the (symbolic) value of *iddirs* that could be employed to develop a contextual theology of Ethiopia. While *iddirs* and churches are intimate to Ethiopians, they do not have a dialogical relationship. The social relevance of churches can only be realized through a dialogical work with *iddirs*. And if *iddirs* want to reappraise themselves, it is essential to become interrelated with churches without compromising their pluralistic traits.

**Introduction**

In the first sections I will present briefly the definition, origin and nature of *iddirs* based on existing literature. Then I will give my own critical review of the studies so far. Then I will discuss what the cultural and theological relevance of *iddirs* is. Furthermore, I will have a brief theological reflection on *iddir*. Finally, I will conclude with a short remark.

**Iddir**

In their not so long history, *iddirs* have spread throughout Ethiopia so rapidly that it is now unthinkable to imagine a village without *iddir* with the exception of remote areas. Iddir is the most widespread association but its composition, system, approach and size may differ from place to place. But all over *iddirs* are community oriented, and mostly religiously and ethnically heterogeneous unless the vicinity is homogenous. They have a high level of participation (Dejene Aredo 2003) and promote self-esteem as each with his/her minor tasks counts (Alemayehu Seifu 1968). They are also egalitarian and transparent (Dejene 2003).

*Iddir* is an indigenous voluntary association. Even if there are similar association elsewhere in Africa, *iddir* is of indigenous origin (Pankhurst 2003). There are numerous types of *iddirs*. The most common one is the neighborhood *iddir* which is formed by people living in the same neighborhood. Second to it comes workplace *iddir*. Yet one can find nowadays various types of *iddirs*. The number of members varies from tens to over a thousand members depending on the area and the network. In work places the number is usually related to the size of the organization (see Pankhurst 2003; Dejene 2003; Shiferaw 2002, Fecadu Gedamu 1974).

**Origin**

In the academic world there are different views on the origin of *iddirs*. Some attribute its origin to urbanization and claim that it was started by migrants who came to work in the city. Others associate it with the Italian occupation when social life was disrupted.

---

1 Solomon Dejene, Nijmegen Institute for Mission Studies, Radboud University of Nijmegen, P.O.Box 9103, 6500 HD Nijmegen, The Netherlands s.dejene@nim.ru.nl
Alemayehu (1968) claims that no iddirs existed before the Italian occupation. He argues that rural life became difficult during the occupation and the city became attractive for those affected. This drastic migratory move to the city accelerated the pace of urbanization. And those who just came from the rural area were not accustomed to the way of life in the city. In rural areas communal life was strong. Mutual relationship among neighbors/relatives is a ruling norm. But in towns people live in physical proximity yet in anonymity. Many new migrants found themselves uprooted and got confused. In time of need they had either very few connections or none at all to lean on. The urban centers were hostile to them and incompatible with their way of life; accordingly it necessitated the creation of associations like iddir (Alemayehu 1968).

Fecadu (1974) claimed that iddirs originated three decades ago in Addis Ababa by migrant groups from acephalous backgrounds. This corresponds roughly to the Italian occupation period (1936-41). He further states that the migrants transplanted their rural social structures to town with certain adjustments to the city way of life. His study reveals that people from centralized social and political systems did not initially join the iddirs. He relates this with the military camp like organizational structure of most of the Ethiopian towns. This in no way encourages differentiation or the development of independent social organizations. But the towns were completely restructured by the Italians. The politico-military structure was removed along with its system of patron-client relationship. This in turn provided the new migrants and people of the lower stratum with an opportunity to organize themselves (Fecadu 1974). Mekuria (1973 in Ottaway 1976) too reasons out in the same way. The Italian occupation caused dislocation and uprootedness as ‘the countryside was the battleground for the Ethiopian Patriotic Forces’. Farmers were executed for harboring them. People sought safe haven and work in the Italian garrison towns. The mutual support system to which the new migrants were accustomed in the countryside did not exist in the newly emerging towns during the Italian occupation. The migrants were isolated or they purposely isolated themselves. However, with the threat of death around, they could no longer stay disconnected but form a network at least among themselves in order to have a decent burial. According to Mekuria iddirs initially drew membership from the same ethnic group or from people coming from the same locality by transplanting their traditional mutual support system.

Pankhurst and some others, on the other hand, are of view that iddir started in Addis Ababa several years after the city was founded in 1886. He also argues that there was no reference to iddir in the historical travel literature and chronicles prior the 20th century. According to Pankhurst, it only appears in the D’Abaddie’s Amharic dictionary of 1881 with a meaning ‘custom, usage’ (2003:11, 16). In line with this Korten asserts that iddirs date back to late 19th century Addis Ababa (1972).

Still there is another difference among academics in regard its urban or rural origin. Pankhurst argues that iddirs are exclusively of urban origin. Even though there are many traditional forms of cooperation related to the rural life, there is no evidence that such cooperation was the foundation of iddirs. Following the argument of Alemayehu, Pankhurst further elaborates that people should not confuse the traditional trend of mutual help and other associations with iddir. The existence of a list of members, written bylaws, monthly monetary contributions, regular meetings, differentiated and fixed coverage scheme came into existence in an urban, monetized and literate setting rather than in the rural area where these did not exist.
Yet others claim that *iddir* is a traditional mutual support system that is transplanted from the rural area with certain modification so as to fit in the urban life (Dejene 2003; Fecadu 1974; Markakis 1974; Mekuria 1973; Levine 1965). By providing an illustrative example from the Gurage experience, Fecadu claims that the strong social orientation among the Gurages and other neighboring ethnic groups has led to the establishment of such urban support systems that could serve fulfill the social and material needs of the new migrant communities and channel their connectedness with their villages. But Dejene is less stern on this point and states that *iddirs* could trace their origin in some rudimentary mutual support form in rural areas long before the Italian occupation. His conjecture is based on the commonness of mutual support networks in rural areas. But he is of opinion that *iddirs* assumed their current form in urban areas where monetization is high (Dejene 2003).

Little is known about how many *iddirs* there were before and during the occupation as they were not registered. However, the 1966 association registration regulation was a decisive factor in determining that *iddirs* must be registered in order to become a legal entity (Shiferaw 2002; Pankhurst 2003; Markakis 1974; Korten 1972). A number of *iddirs* were registered but the vast majority did not see the need for registration, or was afraid that the government would interfere in their activities. However, this became in no way a constraint to the expansion of *iddirs* (Shiferaw 2002).

Most academics agree on the fact that *iddir* membership was originally limited to the poor. Fecadu (1974) states that the *iddir* was initiated by the lower stratum of the society. Markakis (1974) claims also that membership was drawn from the uneducated strata (Dejene 1993; Mekuria 1973).

**Initiators**

Endreas and Pankurst (1958) were the first who came up with the idea that *iddir* might have its origin among the Guraghes. Building on this claim Pankhurst refers to a pamphlet by *Yehibret Minch iddir* (a Soddo Kistane/Guraghe *iddir*) which claims that their *iddir* was established in 1907 by merchants of hides, wax, fat and coffee. These people were despised and discriminated in Addis Ababa partly due to the smell of their ware. They could only gather together in the wood and bury their dead at night. Held during one of their meetings, they were brought to *Fitawrari* Habteghiorghis, the Minister of Defense. They explained to the minister their purpose of getting together. He gave them permission. Pankhurst associates this with both the ethnic foundation of the *iddir* and its origin from the Gurages. He also argues that opponents of this view have not come up with any counter evidence (Pankhurst 2003). Pankhurst and Endreas (1958) base their claim on the fact that the Guraghes had a culture of tending the cattle of the deceased and work on his farm as long as two months. However, Alemayehu (1968) argues that this could not be taken as evidence for such mutual support systems exist among the Amharas and Oromos.

Fecadu (1974) asserts that ethnic groups from a non-centralized socio-political system which were not bound by the clientele system of the Ethiopian state established a social fiber for mutual support. He states that initially they were formed along ethnic lines and local connections mainly because members of one ethnic group settled in one neighborhood. Even if he states that *iddir* is borrowed from acephalous ethnic groups such as the Gurages, he does not directly ascribe it to any particular ethnic group. He

---

2 *Fitawrari* is a traditional Ethiopian military title.
further states that as of the 50’s the *iddirs* have become multiethnic as the residential segregation was abandoned and the *iddir* played an integrative role by bringing people of different ethnic groups together.

**From monoethnic to multiethnic and from monofunctional to multifunctional**

Markakis (1974) states that people prefer to join an *iddir* with a fair number of members from their own ethnic group and Christians and Moslems have separate *iddirs*. Many of the literatures on *iddir* claim that *iddirs* started as an ethnic-based association and later transformed themselves into a multiethnic association with various forms due to both internal and external factors (Mekuria 1973; Fecadu 1974; Shiferaw 2002; Dejene 2003; Pankhurst 2003, Pankhurst & Damen Hailemariam 2000). Some give emphasis to the external factor by stating that both the imperial and the Derg governments discouraged, in some cases, even forced ethnic-based *iddirs* to change their names and reconsider their membership (Pankhurst & Damen 2000; Pankhurst 2003; Shiferaw 2002). Others put emphasis on the fluid nature of *iddirs* which they consider as a quality that has made them adaptable to the multiethnic context of the urban setting in which multiethnic based membership was a natural result (Dejene 2003; Shiferaw 2002; Fecadu 1974).

Alemayehu (1968), on the other hand, reasons out completely in the opposite direction. He asserts that *iddirs* started as neighborhood associations. Later on occupation and tribal *iddirs* came into existence.

Mostly the primary aim of *iddirs* is – at least in their initial stages and now in some cases – the provision of mutual support in time of death. Among the functions of *iddir* decent burial comes first and foremost. Financial, material and emotional support during the bereavement period is also included. Some think that the spread of *iddirs* has to do with the Ethiopian culture that gives high value to death. Many academics claim that *iddirs* have transformed themselves from burial associations to multifunctional ones as *iddirs* have started undertaking a number of development work, business activities and credit facilities. In accordance with the capacity of the *iddirs* some work on sanitation development in the neighborhood, sharing responsibilities in building smaller infrastructures like feeder roads and sewerage systems, and secondarily good social (neighborly) relations, social control, day cares, schools and the likes. (See Dejene 2003; Pankhurst 2003; Shiferaw 2002; Fecadu 1974; Mekuria 1973). On top of the direct role of the *iddirs* in rendering service to their community, they served also as a pressure group on behalf of the community to the local administration such as the provision of tap water (Markakis 1974). One can say that they are in a way channels of communication between the community and the local authority. Markakis (1974) states that the term ‘elders of the community’ refers in the urban context to the *iddir* officials. Quite a lot of the published documents on *iddirs* are on the same line regarding the fact that *iddirs* have evolved from a monofunctional or limited area of function to a multifunctional network.

Even if Alemayehu (1968) mentions that *iddirs*’ primary function is helping each other in time of trouble, he does not differentiate the functions diachronically. He simply states the social functions as supplementary ones to the support rendered during mishaps. However, he asserts that the aspects that regard the welfare of the community are not integrated in all *iddirs*. His statement would raise the question whether *iddirs* started off principally as burial associations. I will discuss this point later on.
Review of the Studies

Certain factual considerations may give us more insight into the evolution of *iddirs*. With the exception of few academics, most of them agree on that *iddirs* came into existence around the beginning of the 20th century and became widespread during the Italian occupation. In the last several decades not only the numbers have increased but also the types have increased. On top of the commonly known neighborhood and work *iddirs*, *iddirs* of those who share the same place of birth and upbringing which is commonly known as ethnic-based *iddir* have also been well established. I would not use the term ethnic-based as that is according to me a misconception. (I will elaborate this toward the end of this section.) But nowadays there are women’s *iddir*, friends’ *iddir*, youth *iddir*, faith-based *iddir*, family *iddir*, former schoolmates’ *iddir*, etc. (Dejene 2003; Shiferaw 2002).

After the victory of Adwa over Italy in 1896, Menelik started a cautious centralization process. The growing town, Addis Ababa, attracted migrants from the countryside. These migrants were not entirely detached from their family in the rural area. They were not accustomed to the centralized and patron-client system of their new area (Fecadu 1973). Also the autonomy of their respective regions was bartered for the consolidation of the power of the central monarch (Messay 1999; Bahru 1991). This added to the uprootedness due to migration compel them to form a social fiber.

Haileselassie intensified the centralization process in such a way that he ended the duality that existed for centuries between the regional nobilities and the imperial monarchy (Assefa 2005). The centuries old tradition of regional autonomy and national unity came to a grinding halt. Haileselassie refused to recognize the title ‘king’ for the regional lords but ironically stuck to the title *Nogusä Nāgāst* (king of kings/the kingdom). In this regard, the Constitution of 1931 was the beginning of the end as it paves the way to declare the infallibility of the *nägäst* and his absolute power over the people of Ethiopia (See Messay 1999; Mesfin 1999; Bahru 1991; 1984; Schwab 1979; Markakis 1974). It is, therefore, reasonable to argue that the ever-growing centralization measures necessitated the formation of a social fiber like *iddir*. The problematic situations during the Italian occupation too drove people to form small network units in order to survive.

Post occupation Ethiopia was not different from the pre-occupation period. Haileselassie showed no sign of changing his course of centralization (Messay 1999). So, ‘people must learn to innovate and to adapt the remnant of the past to meet the demands of the changed circumstances in which they find themselves. Innovation and adaptation always have characterized human behaviour, but now their systematic and intensive application has become requisite to survival.’ (Biernatzki 1991:19)

The Derg regime excelled the former regimes in its centralization measures. It built excessive military apparatus to rule the people with an iron fist. Under the disguise of socialism and national unity, the local power was channeled toward promoting the ideology of those in power. No challenge or opposition was tolerated (Assefa 2005). Through the nationalization of land and big companies, the regime destroyed the spirit

---

3 The author of this article is of opinion that the translation of the Ge’ez *nogusä nägäst* as king of kings or emperor is an adulterated translation. The word *nägäst* has no singular form which means that it could not be the plural of *Nogus* king. The word itself is described in Geez grammar as *mädbäl* which means compound noun. So my argument is that the word *nägäst* could mean the whole complex structure of a nation which I equate with kingdom. Therefore, instead of king of kings or emperor, I would translate it as king of the kingdom. The official translation of *nogusä nägäst* as emperor implies that the throne itself assumed this common (mis)understanding of the meaning of the title.
of competitiveness that existed for centuries (Messay 1999). Autocratic and dictatorial moves of the regime alienated the people from authorities. During this period *iddirs* grew not only in numbers, but also in sorts. People sought in the *iddirs* a kind of refuge and a social fiber.

One can see that the political instability and the collapse of a natural social fiber since the late sixties have made people to find ways in which they could give shape to their need for interpersonal and social relations, and belongingness. Even though the operational potential of *iddirs* was limited by the political control, they provided people personal security, a sense of belongingness, an authentic interpersonal relation, a system with which they can identify themselves, etc. Alemayehu (1968:14) states that people likely join an *iddir* to get some love and attention. Some people become members apparently 'to satisfy their desire to belong, which is closely tied to the desire for security. People believe that in belonging they gain security, for in conformity there is comfort and in union, security, real or fancied.'

In this regard Dessalegn (1992) states that informal institutions such as *iddir* have a variety of significance in shielding the individual and family from the intrusion of the state and form a neighborhood solidarity also creating an alternative realm of discourse where the formal structure is criticized, ridiculed or rejected. He further states that the strength of such informal institutions lies in their autonomy and fluidity. In line with Dessalegn I would like to argue that the nature of such associations is more than what their manifest functional aspects (like burial matters) make us think of them. Shiferaw (2002) confirms this in his masters thesis by stating that traditional and indigenous organizations are part and parcel of the coping mechanisms and survival strategies of people.

The claim that the *iddir* started off as ethnic-based association seems to me ideology oriented reading of the reality while the formation was based on area of birth and upbringing. Markakis goes even further by stating that Christians and Moslems have separate *iddirs*. Such a claim is related to the ethnicization discourse. Even a closer look at the pamphlet to which Pankhurst refers would make us think differently. In order to justify that the *iddir* would probably be the initiative of the Gurages, Pankhurst refers to a pamphlet of a Soddo Kistane *iddir*. But what Pankhurst leaves out is that the Soddo Kistanes are one particular sub-group in the larger Gurage ethnic group. Besides, neither he nor the pamphlet to which he refers gives us any further explanation as to whether their forming of the *iddir* was directly related to their ethnic affiliation or to the fact that they were discriminated as merchants4. The Soddo Kistane might be the first to establish an *iddir*.

Nevertheless, one cannot conclusively say that they formed the *iddir* because they wanted an exclusively ethnic-based group. Based on this very pamphlet, one can definitely conclude that they formed a group because they were discriminated and given a despicable social status. By ascribing ethnic identity to the formation of *iddirs*, among others, that of the *yehibret minch iddir*, academics have promoted a certain ideology that reads the social reality from an ethnocentric point of view.

*Iddirs* were founded by those who came from the same area, like *yeselale tewelajoch iddir* (people born in Selale), *Yemecha iddir* (People of Mecha), *Yekembata iddir* (people from Kembata), etc (See Shiferaw 2002). Most of the names of the *iddirs* do not explicitly refer to an ethnic group but to a geographical area. By forming an *iddir* by the

---

4 Until recently merchants in general were despised and had derogatory names like *mechagna nekash*.  

540
name *yeselale tewelajo*ch, the very name will allow someone born in *Selale* with a different ethnic background other than *Oromo*, to become a member unless the byelaw explicitly makes it impossible. For instance, in the *Yemecha iddir* you would not find an *Oromo* from *Arsi*, *Harar* or *Wellega*. Membership was exclusively for those who were born and brought up in the *Mecha* area. Children of migrants in the area, particularly those who were an integral part of the community were allowed to join the *iddir* even though they were not from the same ethnic group by blood.¹

Name of an area could possibly be associated with an ethnic group, but it does not necessarily mean one particular ethnic group. Most of the members and at times all members of such *iddirs* could naturally belong to one ethnic group, but it is in my view not justifiable to label them as ethnic-based *iddirs*. Particularly people from minority ethnic groups might have an *iddir* that has/had members exclusively of their own ethnic group. But this is mainly because most of the minority ethnic groups like the Kembatas, Wolaytas and Dorzes come from an area that is relatively small and homogenous. It was also a common phenomenon that people who came to towns from the countryside would form an *iddir* as they settled usually in one neighborhood.² Fecadu (1974) asserts that there was a general tendency that one ethnic group would dominate the membership due to the fact that members of one particular ethnic group settled in one area in the cities till half way through the last century. Thus, while forming a neighborhood association in a homogeneous setting, one cannot expect from the association to be heterogeneous. But it is highly unlikely that they would include someone from another area purely because she/he belongs to their ethnic group. Furthermore, Shiferaw corroborates this with his claim that *iddirs* designated under ethnic and regional name during the imperial period did not exclude others with the exception of some Gurage *iddirs*. Comparing this with the post 1991 reemerging *iddirs* with ‘ethnic orientation’, he claims that the reemerging ones are strictly exclusive (Shiferaw 2002:51).

I think it is essential to mention how such a discourse arose. Such a reading of social fibers is related to the ethnicization discourse that took ground in the country in the 1960’s. Due to the autocratic nature of the Haile Selassie regime along with its mainly Shewan inclinations, there was resentment among other Amharas and ethnic groups. The students’ movement and the elite sought redemption in a Marxist-Leninist approach by demanding self-determination for all nations and nationalities (Messay 2006; Messay 1999). This ethnicization discourse began in the sixties and reached its climax in the early nineties. Following a Marxist-Leninist discourse the radical elite and students’ movements assumed themselves as liberators of the mass (Messay 2006).

Such a discourse constructs an ideology and affects the power relations. By following a Marxist-Leninist ethnic discourse, the students’ movement constructed a

---

¹ Dejene Woldeyohannes, the father of the author of this article, has been a member of the Mecha *iddir* for years even though he is not at all an Oromo by birth. He was born and brought up in the Mecha area. His father settled there as a child. Their *iddir* was oriented toward solidarity between those who are living there and those who have already left. Their aim was to strengthen solidarity among the people of the area rather than based on their ethnic affiliation which many academics misread as ethnic-based development. According to the information I gathered from Mr. Basile Woldegabriel, whose father was a member of the Mecha and Tulema -self-help association, which was originally not ethnic-based but oriented toward forming an association for descendants of the Mecha and the Tulema families for the purpose of mainly the development of the area. This association did not have Oromo members from Harerghe, Bale, Arsi, etc. Even not all members were Oromo. (See also Bahru Zewde 1991); Even if all the members would have been Oromos, that does not make it automatically an ethnic based association.

² Names like Gondere seffer, Gurage embassy, Gojjam berenda, Dorze seffer, Tigre seffer, etc. indicate that people from the same area did settle in the same neighborhood.
reality. ‘Certain uses of language are ideological, namely those, in specific circumstances, to establish or sustain relations of domination. The ideologies embedded in discursive practices are most effective when they become naturalized, and achieve the status of ‘common sense’.’ (Fairclough 1992: 87). Language contributes to the shaping of the social reality and it is, at the same time, determined by the social. As a social practice language is always in dialectical relationship with other dimensions of the social. (Fairclough 1992; 1993). Language determines and is also determined by the relations of power of its users. By choosing certain types of discourse, producers of a text invest in a certain ideology and power relation. The term text refers in this context to written, oral as well as visual ones. Producers of a text draw on certain texts and discourses in a particular way in order to maintain or bring about change in the existing discourse, ideology, power relations and the likes. Consumers of a text too make use of discourses at their disposal to interpret a given text and delimit the meaning among the possibilities of potential meanings.

Accordingly once the ethnocentric discourse wins terrain among the elite and certain political wings, social reality has been read and described from that construct-centric perspective. A number of the academics doing research in the area of iddir and other social fibers have taken this reading without paying attention to its ideological implications. Probably they have deliberately chosen for an ethnicized analysis. That is why iddirs have been misread as social networks originally set up out of ethnic affiliations while they were in fact started as associations for people who were born and grown up in the same area.

Many have also described iddir as a mutual aid in time of death. To justify their argument they claim that Ethiopian culture puts emphasis on death. Dejene’s statement ‘the often-disapproved after-death services’ (2003, 45) emanates from such a discourse. Even though Dejene states a number of reasons why iddirs are becoming ever more popular, his analysis is mainly from a functional perspective. Fecadu (1974: 367) has some nuances in this regard. He states that the ‘primary manifest’ aim of iddir is ‘mutual aid in times of misfortune, death, sickness, etc’. He does not limit the aim to death or burial matters but builds it around a number of mishaps. Furthermore, the fact that he uses the phrase, ‘primary manifest’, could be an indication to not-manifest aims. According to Alemayehu (1968) the function of iddir has never been exclusively confined to burial matters. He states that one can postpone marriage for lack of money but burial cannot be postponed. Bearing this in mind, it is not difficult to grasp why death plays a manifest primary role in iddir.

But what such an argument does not take into account is that death is an integral part of life. Death, more specifically burial, is a witnessing symbol of the life of the deceased or the family. The more the number of people attends the funeral of a person the more it says about the social relation or in a way the righteous nature of the deceased or his/her family. Expressions like qebari atasatagin/ayasatah (May God not deny me/you of people who bury you) or swears like, meqabereh lai algomim (I swear not to attend your funeral) are usually taken literally while their implications are related to interpersonal/social relations in the community. In the former expression lies a tendency of the person to live in peace and friendly terms with the people around him/her. The second expression comes forth out of serious social offence done against a person.

For iddirs burial matters are the ones that bind all together. Both rich and poor, young and old, healthy and sick die. As iddir’s structural nature is egalitarian, their binding symbol revolves around death which is also non-discriminating. It is not so that
*iddirs* were/are too concerned with death and burial matters but it is because they deal with death as an integral part of life. By organizing a good funeral ceremony, they keep the life of the deceased in their memory and/or in the memory of the remaining family members. It is not uncommon that people talk in a very positive way about a deceased person if the funeral ceremony is attended by many people, if the weather is good during a burial.

**Cultural and theological relevance**

The political situation of post-occupation Ethiopia has not been conducive to build on existing cultures. Successive governments have denied Ethiopia to be proud of her history and cultures. *Iddir* is born out of such deprivation. By taking the story that the despised hide and wax traders from Gurage started *iddir* are we not affirming that negative socio-political situation is, paradoxical enough, a fertile ground for social fibers. Lack and deprivation impede human agency. And agency is ‘made possible and sustained only through communal relationship’ (Hollenbach 1989: 92) and is one of the basic essences of human dignity. *Iddir* is a communal and cultural reaction to the unfriendly social, cultural and political order. It is a non-verbal discourse against political hegemony, cultural alienation and national instability. When there are conflicting interests and world views between individuals/groups/regions and authorities, social fibers arise as a means to hold together. No wonder that the more oppressive regimes become the more diversified smaller units of social fibers have been emerging in the form of various types of *iddirs*. Not all social fibers will achieve in satisfying the need and interest of the deprived, but those that survive the external pressure and bind the people together become part of the culture. Indeed *iddir*, born of oppression, conflict, deprivation and alienation has outlived the regimes and the systems that disrupted smaller units of social mobility. *Iddir* is one of the most significant survival strategies of the (urban) population in Ethiopia (Dessalegn 1999; Salole as cited by Dejene 1993).

*Iddir* membership is a kind of indescribable education. One learns there the ethos of his/her culture, his/her personal responsibilities, and his/her personality in relation to others. Culture gives people a sense of identity, security and personal esteem. Culture is an instrument with symbols, rituals, stories, world-views that people use to give structure to their lives. (Biernatzki 1991). *Iddirs* are ‘root paradigms’ for the Ethiopian society. Root paradigms are cultural models for behavior. ‘[R]oot paradigm…is probably concerned with fundamental assumptions underlying the human societal bond with preconditions of communitas.’ (Turner 1974: 68) *Iddirs* assume also human bond in that their main leitmotif is the well being of the community. Root paradigms provide participants a pattern to structure and regulate their (social) actions at every stage. They give people form and stability to ‘processual units’. In their written and unwritten norms *iddirs* structure the community and determine their (social) actions. At the same time the egalitarian nature and the unmediated relationship between persons which does not in any way submerge one in the other preserve and make realize their uniqueness while realizing their commonness. Such relations do not blend identities but freed them from conformity (Turner 1974: 274).

Their egalitarian nature and their relational function transcend their structure. Their structure attempts to define each member as a separate entity but the ‘anti-structural’

---

7 The term anti-structure is used in Turner’s studies to connote a body that is undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, extant, nonrational, existential, I-Thou relationships. It is not in the negative sense
characteristic dictates. This is manifest in the social activities that take place beyond what is expected according to the written norms.

**Theological Reflection on Iddir**

The relational and communal aspects of *iddir* could be of significance in linking it to the Christian understanding of the person. The opening pages of Genesis tell the story how God created humans – male and female. ‘Let us make man in our own image and in the likeness of ourselves … So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.’ (Gn 1:26-27) This story implicates the relational dimension of the human person derived from the first and foremost communal and relational Person – the Triune God – after whose image and likeness he/she is shaped. It is also stated, ‘It is not right that man should be alone.’ (Gen. 2.18) ‘Their companionship produces the primary form of interpersonal communion. For by his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential.’ (Gaudium et Spes: 12) The realization and fulfillment of personality is achieved only through relation and love of other persons.

The mutual relation that is governing the *iddirs* could be identified as a parallel to the Christian understanding of person in his/her relationality. As stated above *iddirs* are not primarily functional but rather identical (that of identity) in which persons join them to identify themselves with and be identified with them. This could be understood as an extension from defining the person interpersonally. This relationality expresses itself also in the participation of the person in the society, which is a manifestation of human agency. The high level of participation in *iddirs* promotes human agency. This is where the theological and the cultural intersect. This participatory relationality expresses mutual implication of members which in turn results in the ‘common good’ of them.

According to Lonergan (1993) the ‘common good’ has three essential aspects: particular goods, good of order, and value. He said further that it is only one thing that is good by its very essence and that is God. Everything else is good by participation. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that the discussion will be about the (common) good by participation. This ‘common good’ concerns persons. Participation demands interaction; therefore, the characteristic traits of the person in its relationality plays a significant role in understanding it. In other words, the person is the defining factor of the common good. The ‘common good’ entails primarily of having the social structure and environments on which the human society depends. It is a system in which people work in a manner that benefits all. The ‘common good’ is a good to all members of society and no one is excluded. Or as Maritain (1966: 49-50) puts it, ‘The common good is common because it is received in persons, each one of whom is a mirror of the whole…The end of society, therefore, is neither the individual good nor the collection of the individual goods of each of the persons who constitute it.’ (My emphasis) It brings about increase of the whole and the part by being shared. The common good is there to be shared; it grows by being shared rather than diminish. An authentic interpersonal relationship is characterized by mutual interdependence. Such interdependence is the basis for the ‘common good’. Mutual interdependence takes place in freedom to be in relation with.

The realization of the ‘common good’ requires respect for the many different forms of interrelationship and community. This interpersonal relationship is characterized by
the ‘common good’ that consists of an ethical life lived in common – a life of justice and love. This undertaking makes it possible for people to realize their good in history because the issue concerns here the ‘common good’ in a temporal and spatial framework. As a means, it is a historical concept while the ultimate common good can be categorized as the realization of the good in eternity which is communion with each other and with God. Therefore, concludes Hollenbach, the temporal ‘common good’ as it is attainable in history is pluralistic in nature. Pluralistic in such a way that no one good may be absolutized, but each will have a place within the framework of social existence. The very fact that *iddirs* are pluralistic makes them compatible with the principle of the ‘common good’. Without appealing to any absolute standards, still the principles and thoughts of the *City of God* can lay a theological foundation in identifying the temporal system (polities) as a possible partial embodiment of the absolute common good (Hollenbach 1989:85).

This theological principle of the ‘common good’ is in line with the underlying principle of *iddirs*. *Iddirs* are there for interpersonal interdependence. Each member benefits from every input; at the same time the *iddir* itself benefits by the individual inputs. Where the social pastoral (common good) and the cultural (*iddirs* in their communal interdependence) touch each other, Christian value and culture can enrich each other.

The Christian principle of solidarity too has a parallel in the *iddirs*. Solidarity uncovers a disposition, buried under the established social and political conditions, toward cooperation, mutual aid, common feeling, therefore toward the common good. It is simultaneously anticipative insofar as it also draws a picture of the future human being, who will ultimately be free to develop its cooperative and common strengths without hindrance. In the *iddir* solidarity is both a means and an end. It is a means in the sense that it is instrumentalized to achieve a certain goal/ the ‘common good’ of the members. It is an end in the sense that it is the actualization of the association that leans upon its mutual relationship and interdependence. Solidarity is about love and interrelatedness. It is also a manifestation of an aspect of personhood. ‘Personhood requires the balance of self-love and self-gift…Personhood is the bridge between ourselves and *everything* and *everyone* else, past, present, and future.’ (LaCugna 1991: 290) *Iddirs* are both altruistic and egocentric. Their altruistic characteristic is manifest in the commitment of the members to support the other and in their relationality. Their egocentric nature emanates from each member’s aspiration to benefit from them. The balance between the two is a parallel of the balance between the self-love and the self-gift in the principle of solidarity. Solidarity reminds us of the connection we have with the entire humanity regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, sex, etc. and particularly with the deprived. *Iddirs* are solidary within themselves. The fast growth of non-ethnic based *iddirs* is a witness that the society at large transcends ethnic particularism.

Mention was made that *iddirs* came into existence partly because of deprivation, discrimination and oppression. By forming an *iddir* people become solidary with each other and build a buffer to defend themselves from the system. In this way, solidarity must be seen above all in its value as a moral virtue that determines the order of institutions. On the basis of this principle that “structures of sin” that dominate relationships between individuals and peoples must be overcome. They must be purified and transformed into structures of solidarity…” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004: no. 193).
Final Remarks

So far we have seen that there is enough cultural and theological ground to interrelate iddir and certain Christian principles. Even if both church and iddir are close to the Ethiopian society, the two have not encountered each other in a dialogical way. The churches have not yet invested in exploiting the juncture in addressing social, pastoral or theological issues. The Churches are mainly concerned with the spiritual. And their social and development responsibilities are channeled through their own development desks. Iddirs are also mostly concerned with their own community with little openness to entities outside of them. Churches have the experience of operating in dialogue with others; they are also by virtue of their Gospel mission, responsible in dialoging with traditional systems like iddir. Iddirs can serve as a social space where churches can reflect theologically in order to address social, pastoral and other issues. Even the symbolic significance of iddir can be of inspiration to adopt it in their rituals. When debteras developed the wereb, they must have taken some inspiration from the traditional folk’s music and dance, and of course the traditional way of life. The same is expected from contemporary liturgists and debteras and priests.

If both religion and iddir would like to play a significant role in the Ethiopian society, it makes it even more imperative that the churches not only seek cooperation with iddir but also make the symbolic value of iddir the integral part of their pastoral, social and liturgical services. The Good News can only be communicated in an understandable way if it is baptized in the river of the local culture. In such a way it is possible to enrich iddir by theological reflections, and the church would broaden her relevance and address contemporary issues from a Christian perspective through the local optic. As a multi-religious group the iddir can also be a good instrument for interreligious dialogue in a country where the religious tolerance and recognition are on the decline. Taking pride on the tradition of the past does not suffice by itself. Ethiopia is defined historically in relation to the present. Churches can no longer pride only of the past. If the past does not become an integral part of the present through which Ethiopians define themselves, it becomes a fairytale. The present is offering itself to be connected with the past just like the ‘fusion of the horizon’ of churches and iddir.

References

Exploring iddir


