



**A Book Chapter Entitled, “Do They Make Sense Anywhere Else? Urban Theories in Action: Bahir Dar City in Focus”**

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**1. Introduction**

**1.1. Background of the Study**

Urbanization, as a major demographic trend, has become a global phenomenon. The year 2007, being taken as a tipping point where global urban population outnumbered the rural one for the first time, has been followed by increase in the magnitude of regional and global urbanization (Orum 2005). Ethiopia, with a projected 18% urban population in 2018, has also been urbanizing fast. Its urban growth implicates, inter alia, increase in urban areas of which Bahir Dar is among the most important ones. Bahir Dar has been urbanizing fast. Its population size increased from 167,261 in 2005 to 249,125 in 2013 and total area from 28 Km<sup>2</sup> in 2005 to 286.6 Km<sup>2</sup> in 2006 and then after. According to the city administration, Bahir Dar is also witnessing high rate of urbanization, 6.4 percent in 2017. Built up area has also shown large increase, especially, over the past three decades (Abraham 2020). Focusing on urban growth in the city in the post revolution period, especially since the city’s designation as the capital of Amhara region in 1993, the study assessed the nature of urbanization and urbanism in the city by through the lenses of urban sociological theories.

Bahir Dar city provides what many literatures referred to as the ‘locale’ (its physical/territorial boundary) and ‘milieu’ (social, cultural, and political processes) dimensions that can possibly intrigue varieties of investigations. The milieu dimension is embedded in its locale dimension,

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but it transcends the locale dimension; locale provides the physical context for milieu, but does not delimit milieu (Durr Schmidt 1997 cited by Smart and Smart 2003; Jayaram 2009).

Bahir Dar city is the locale in which many milieus interact and define urban life apparent in it. Assessment of both the locale and milieu dimensions of Bahir Dar city by drawing on theories of both urban sociology, in particular, and social science, in general, would help capture the nature of urban growth in the city. In this paper, the researcher tried to explicate urbanization and urbanism in Bahir Dar city by drawing on the works of sociologists from Simmel to Wirth to Castells to Fischer, who had all expounded on urbanization and urban life with variegated lenses about it.

## **2. Method of the Study**

Cross-sectional research design, where data are collected from participants of a study at a limited period and one point in time (Jupp 2006; Lavrakas 2008), was used to gather data concerning the nature of urban growth and urbanism in Bahir Dar city. In terms of the study's research approach, a mixed methods design was used. The approach was useful to develop a better understanding of the issue at hand, i.e. urban growth and urbanism in Bahir Dar city, by complementing one set of results with another.

The researcher employed in-depth interview, focus group discussion (FGD), observation, and survey research methods. Interviews, involving a set of assumptions and understandings about the situation which are not normally associated with a casual conversation (Miller and Brewer 2003; Denscombe 2007), enabled the researcher to explore the informants' opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences about the negative impact of urban growth on Bahir Dar city in an in-depth manner. Focus group discussion, a method whereby people were asked to come to discuss certain issues (Yeraswork 2010), was used to capitalize on group dynamics among informants about the negative impacts of urban expansion on Bahir Dar city. Observation was used in the entire process of undertaking the investigation to substantiate the effectiveness of other methods. The researcher observed the study area by drawing theoretical ideas and thoughts from the field of (urban) sociology. Settlement patterns, physical aspects of urban growth and neighborhoods, impacts of urban growth and urbanism, nature and forms of social interaction in different settings including family, friendship networks, market areas, and many others were issues observation accentuated on. In addition, survey method, which had a descriptive use while conducting the

study, was especially used while collecting large data from 280 household respondents about urban growth and urbanism in the city.

With regard to the researcher's intension of conducting a descriptive study of the nature of urban growth and urbanism in the city, a non-probability purposive sampling method was employed to select 280 households. Besides, the researcher entertained accidental sampling whenever the necessity and importance of acquiring any data from potential household samples appealed. The relative importance of settlements of households, socio-economic activities of neighborhoods and households, attributes of households that have relation with hues of the issue under investigation, and the presumed importance of households in generating appropriate data were considered whilst selecting households.

The researcher used both primary and secondary data. Primary data were gathered from research participants while secondary data were made in to use through review of books, magazines, fact books, brochures (which dealt with the profile of the study area), previous studies (which had affinity with the issue under investigation) and other written and documented materials. Interview guides, focus group discussion (FGD) guide, observation checklist, and survey questionnaire were also used to collect data from research participants in the study area.

### **3. Result and Discussion**

This section presents the discussion of urban growth and urbanism in Bahir Dar city by focusing on the repercussions of the process of urbanization in urbanism (the life style of people) in the city. The researcher attempted to apply the perspectives of urban sociological theories in the context of urbanization in Bahir Dar city. Hence, the study tried to pinpoint the assumptions of such major sociological theorists as Tonnies, Simmel, Wirth, Fischer, Castles, and Harvey.

#### **3.1. Community and Cosmopolitanism**

Drawing from Jayaram (2009), urban growth and urbanism in Bahir Dar city can be elucidated through a scrutiny at the juxtaposition of 'community and cosmopolitanism' divide as features and manifestations of urban life in the city, as they are elsewhere. Community here denotes relationships and networks circling around parochialism centered on tribalism, provincialism, and/or kinship and other blood-related identities, and personal, intimate, and traditional interactions. Cosmopolitanism here does not denote a metropolitan city structure but that city dwellers are atomized individuals with segmented personalities; that urban life is characterized

by superficial interactions; and that the city provides the arena for various cultural (and social) backgrounds and involves the growing importance of economic aspects in cultural goals and aspirations.

Many literatures in urban sociology and other fields in occidental countries are of the view that urbanism is much more characterized by cosmopolitanism than sense of community albeit the fact that the importance of the latter as mode of urban life is apparent even in bigger cities from New York to Chicago to London to Paris. Hereafter the researcher discussed the notion of 'cosmopolitanism' as a feature of urbanism in Bahir Dar city by drawing on the works of Tonnies, Durkheim, Simmel, and Wirth.

Tonnies and Durkheim's analyses on 'Gesellschaft' and 'Organic Division of Labor' accentuated on impersonal, superficial, and rational modes of social behavior apparent in cities; phenomena which could denote cosmopolitan feature of cities in that they supported heterogeneous people, as opposed to rural areas (Stolley 2005; Kendall 2007; Lemert 2012; Shaefer 2013). Simmel propounded that cities, as opposed to rural areas, developed 'the blasé attitude' which involved besides urbanites' individuality, reserve, indifference, and apathy-forms of psychological protection that become parts of the metropolitan lifestyle and personality (Traub and Little 1999; Lee and Newby 2000). Wirth examined how cities influence the social organization, attitudes, and personalities of inhabitants arguing that urbanism, or urbanization, produced several consequences: impersonality and anonymity; loss of trust among people; and various forms of social disorganization, as in higher rates of crime than in rural areas (Savage, Warde, and Ward 2003; Barnett 2005; Shoemaker, 2010; Flanagan 2010).

Taking the words of Wirth (1938), as compared to the surrounding rural areas, Bahir Dar is characterized by high population size, density, and heterogeneity. Besides population increase, migration has resulted in heterogeneity and differentiation in the city. This can be compared to the heterogeneity (and cosmopolitanism of course) of urbanites considered by Tonnies, Durkheim, and Wirth with a great deal of nuance in the level between the categories though; the difference being attributed to population size and diversity in (racial and) ethnical background of urbanites as it is much less pronounced in the case of Bahir Dar city.

Centering on its population size, density, and heterogeneity, the cosmopolitan feature of residents of the city involves aspects which can be discussed in light with the theoretical ideas expounded on by sociologists in their study in European and American cities. Superficiality,

impersonality, blasé attitude, and money centered (economic benefit in general) personality and life style have come to define the city's residents as compared to rural areas found in the surrounding. Investments, industries, hotels, schools and colleges, bureaucratic organizations, and development of other informal sectors all mean the perpetuation of high division of labor as the characteristic feature of interdependence and solidarity among residents of the city unlike that of rural areas. The city is also more inflicted with crime and deviant behaviors, two unyielding consequences of urban growth in Bahir Dar city as discussed by Abraham Achenef (2020) in his study of the assessment of negative impacts of urban growth on Bahir Dar city, unlike rural areas, albeit it also represents a safer place where barbaric and irrational behaviors, which constitute criminal behaviors too as in the case of vendetta, for instance, are usually far from existence. Competition and pursuit for economic gain and profit is profoundly evident among people. Besides entertainment and embrace of forms of (traditional) social organization, economic exchange has now become a major mode of social interaction. The 'Money speaks' attitude and inclination has become the main component of principle of urban life in the city. Material acquisition had replaced sentiment based personal acquaintanceship as the goal in the mind set of people; a process which marks a shift in cultural value that dictates aspirations and conformity among the residents. A good example to this fact could be the case of increasing engagement in formal education (in high schools, colleges, and university) and urban economy (both formal and informal) by priests, people who represent one of the most conservative groups of the city's residents. Beyond their customary engagement in the priesthood, many priests, being dressed in cassock, had become employed in bureaucratic organizations and engaged in trading and other businesses (even in growing and selling of *Khat*) as a means of diversifying sources of livelihood.

The blasé attitude, one of the pronounced ideas of Simmel (Tischler 2007; Ferrante 2011; Ritzer 2011) in the analysis of urbanites' life style is apparent in mode of life in the city, especially among the youth who constitute vibrant and change seeking groups of people with a general inclination of little investment in the dominant cultural trend. This is particularly important in the scrutiny of urban life style in Bahir Dar city, as opposed to that of the rural one. Triggered by the mass media and globalization, reserve, indifference, and apathy have come to constitute the urban lifestyle and personality of the youth, especially among college and university students. The youth, particularly in school settings, exhibit reserve, apathy, and indifference in interest, preference, and aspiration. The profound consideration of these variables as hues of personality

triggers and reinforces establishment of groups (with a subculture) that are usually typical and exclusive to outsiders, given differences in interest and preference as central to their formation. In this process, these groups embrace subcultures, which demanded a sui generis perception from outsiders and seek appreciation and conformity to cultural trends beyond the parent one/dominant ideology; for instance interest and preference for Hollywood-produced songs and movies, and discussions on seemingly occult and defying behaviors and ideas as signs and measure of the extent of modernity etc. The blasé attitude is, especially, apparently reflected in any possible form of interaction between ‘city boys’ and ‘የወደድ ለገባ’ (yewereda lejochi), the latter being a discouraging naming pattern used in the city to refer to youths from *woredas* and rural areas. In such forms of interactions, the ‘city boys’, who usually involve superior complexity while dealing with youths migrated to the city from rural areas, reflect reserve and indifference to form friendship networks; to have a chat on issues of interest; and even to be seen alongside the so called ‘*yeworeda lejochi*’.

Diversity in terms of religious affiliation is also another feature where cosmopolitanism is explained through in the city. Unlike before and certainly the surrounding rural areas, Bahir Dar has nowadays become a place where a multitude of religious denominations and sects are practiced. This has been fostered, mainly, by urban-urban migration and the influence of mass media and globalization. Further, the accommodation of diversified religious groups and interests acts sometimes as a pulling factor for migrants from small urban and rural areas in the surrounding which adds grist to the mill to the consolidation of religious differentiation, and hence cosmopolitanism.

Cosmopolitanism, as tried to associate to Bahir Dar city by drawing the works of renowned sociologists, is however quite different from its essence and features in western and other big metropolises. The difference involves citizenship, pronounced religious, ethnical (and racial) differences, the extent and type of migration (especially international migration), and population size. These hues are much lesser in Bahir Dar and this, fortunately, can provide us an opportunity to look in to the other face of the duality, i.e. sense of community. Unlike the case of occidental cities, which served in fact as experiment for researchers, much characterized by cosmopolitanism, Bahir Dar exhibits a pronounced sense of community and identity.

Bahir Dar houses people whose ties and interactions reflect elements and features quite similar to ‘Gemeinschaft’ and rural communities’ features as propounded by Tonnies and other theorists.

Determined by the relatively short urban history and high rural-urban migration, urban life in the city is characterized by interactions united by ties of family (kinship) and neighborhood, social life characterized by intimate, private and exclusive living together, members bound by common language and traditions, recognized common goods and evils (especially in terms of deviations), common friends and enemies. The city offers a variety of network possibilities which vary in terms of the scale on which they are organized as does the nature of their organization too. There are many networks and forms of social organizations in the city developed based on religion, family, kinship, and parochialism/provincialism (birth place). *Senbetie*, a form of social organization with members being exclusively Orthodox Christians, is a dominant means of social tie found and widely utilized almost all over the city. *Senbeties* are usually held monthly in church compounds and halls. *Mahiber* is also the other religion-based form of social organization widely attended and followed. *Idir* and *Ikub*, which constitute the most inclusive modes of social organization, are very pervasive in many neighborhoods of the city.

Festivities including *Zikir*, *Merkat*, *Keristna* and other forms of social organizations (*Tezkar and mastezazen*, the latter serving more of as a social therapy), many of which have a religious value, are dominant instruments holding residents of the city together. Sense of community (identity) is apparent in the aforementioned forms of social organization that there are many *Mahibers*, for instance, which are formed based on kinship, family, birth place similarity and so on. As discussed with research participants ‘*Yehana Mahiber*’ (religious celebration based on commemoration of Saint Anne), as a form of social organization, for instance, can illustrate the case by which members are organized through blood line, as they are relatives, and birth place as they are all from a place called *Kidist Hana* in *South Gondar zone, Fogera Woreda*. Likewise, there are many *Mahibers* and *Idirs* in the city including those formed on such places of births as *Adet, Zege, Wollo, Este, Merawi* etc. There are many ‘*yebeteseb tiwiwiks*’ (soirees) held in members’ houses in the city as well as the rural *kebeles*<sup>2</sup> and the surroundings, whereby they transcend location and residence.

Social interactions and organization exhibit other features of rural communities. General reciprocity is a widely seen rule and principle in many illustrations of urban life in interactions and forms of organizations. Neighbors and relatives usually attend *Merkat, Keristna, Tezkar*, or *Zikir* on the proviso that they are governed by the rule of general reciprocity that there would

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<sup>2</sup> The lowest administrative unit in the city

come a time for others to organize festivities and the likes as situations and contexts appeal and lead them through. Religious values (and practices) are also highly followed and cherished as much as they are in rural areas. 'Ye'kolo temaris' (students at traditional church schools) attend their priesthood teachings organized in many churches in the city. This phenomenon is highly organized that 'ye'kolo temaris' organize settlement neighborhoods in and around the compounds of many churches and depend for livelihood on wandering around for food and rendering religious services, for instance reading Holy Books like *Dersane Mikael* (which usually is followed by holy watering members of the household) for adherents, the latter illustrating the case where livelihood mechanism has evolved among the priesthood. Residents of the city, in association with clerks in churches, usually organize exclusive programs and zones of delivering food for 'yekolo temaris'. Additionally, although they have begun engaging in formal sectors of employment, many priests in the city depend highly on tithes and other benefits they got from their '□□□□ □□□' (ye'nefis lejoch), a tradition quite similar (originated from rural areas in deed) to the practice in rural areas.

It has been said before that the sense of cosmopolitanism thriving in Bahir Dar city has engendered differentiation of religious denominations. However, this consolidation and differentiation involves community and sense of identity among members. There are many social organizations, including *Idirs*, among Muslims where membership is exclusive to fellow adherents. The *Woyto* community is also another case illustrating the cosmopolitanism-community duality of urban life; on one hand, members of the community have become more involved in the mainstream culture than before; on the other hand, they still maintain isolated and exclusive neighborhoods, with typical living pattern and exclusive forms of social organization.

Generally, the works of Tonnies, Durkheim, Simmel, and Wirth are found to be of greater significance to look in to urban life in Bahir Dar city. However, most of the theories, by their nature, threw a dark light on urbanization and urban life. The theories do not suffice to elucidate the governing rules and principles of the city's urban life. In fact, they have been criticized for their pitfalls in failing to fully uncover urban social life elsewhere as they are in Bahir Dar city.

### **3.2. Informality as a form of Social Organization in Bahir Dar City**

Fischer challenged the Wirth (and Simmel) interpretation of the city by arguing that "*the city was not characterized by impersonality and anonymity but, rather, by a variety of social ties and*



*subcultures that made people connect one to another*” (Orum 2005). Fischer added that large agglomerations in cities begot opportunities for promotion of subcultures and efficient social ties and networks (Gottdiener and Hutchison 2011). Fischer’s analytical work could give us an insight to understand urban social life in the city taking a far typical vantage point. The sense of ‘cosmopolitanism’ thriving in Bahir Dar city has been discussed. The trend of migration and promotion of religious diversity and tolerance in the city fostered the contexts for emergence of strands of social life centered on respective religious affiliations. Multiculturalism has become more evident and pronounced unlike before which further the city’s conviviality to its residents’ meaningful life.

Subcultures had involved and spawned deviant behaviors ranging from prostitution to addiction to begging to kinky sexual behaviors. These deviant behaviors embraced respective subcultures (and hence forms of informality) which were put in to conflict against the mainstream culture. But they also serve as effective means of solidarity and social tie among their members. Prostitution in the city center, for instance, involves emergence and perpetuation of subculture that brings fellow members together in spite of their mess with occupants of the dominant ideology. Coffee ceremonies, weekly held *Ikubs*, and exclusive sharing of home utensils and materials in day to day life, for instance, boost their solidarity and the continuity of the subculture. *Khat* growing and chewing, as a form of deviant behavior, is also worthy of notice by which Fischer’s theoretical work can be drawn to substantiate and expound on the case.

Although there is no accurate information about the exact date of practice and growing of *Khat* in Bahir Dar city, it is believed it was first used and grown in *kebele 07* (present day *Belay Zeleke kebele*) around Bahir Dar Teacher’s College (present day Bahir Dar University *Peda* campus) for its stimulant effect so that students would take it to stay long and active while studying. Nowadays, there are many *kebeles* which grow *Khat* abundantly. It has become a major source of income for many people in and around the city. Production of *Khat* helps many actors secure means of livelihood; from farmers and urbanites in the city, who grow it in their orchards and yards, ‘*koraches*’ (people who cut the leaves from the shrub/bush), ‘*gerabis*’ (people who prepare the final form of ‘chewable *Khat*’ and place it in plastic materials), distributors, and transporters. The network stretches from the city to *Addis Ababa*, *Afar*, *Wollo*, *Tigray*, *Metema*, and even *Benishangul*. Besides its economic value, *Khat* chewing is among deviant behaviors in the city. It especially involves a subculture among people who grow, sell, and chew it.

The subculture of *Khat* sellers and chewers has sustained over time that many distributors and owners of *shisha* houses have nowadays become active and dominant figures in the mainstream culture. The economic affluence of these vendors and distributors has played a great role in establishing fine status by them. While observing and administering interviews, the researcher encountered people who talked about *Khat* vendors and distributors, who constitute nouveau riches, with great respect and admire unlike the old times. As a matter of fact many distributors and transporters (nouveau riches) were innovative enough that they discarded engagement in formal education long before (and became subject of labeling for doing so) and stuck in such informal businesses including *Khat* vending and transporting. Their engagement in the business has paid off that they have become rich, some even becoming millionaires, owing fine villas and other luxuries. They are now even the most applauded individuals in their neighborhoods. They participate in social organizations (both mainstream and subcultural) and other forms of social gatherings, occasions, and celebrations, most of which demand high investment, many of which are usually funded and financed by rich people of whom *Khat* distributors and transporters are the most noted one.

### **3.3. The Political Economy perspective**

Political economic theories of urbanism could be drawn to explicate urban growth in Bahir Dar city. Being influenced by Marx, there are many variants of this perspective ranging from the work of Lefebvre to Harvey and Castells. The combined theoretical works of the aforementioned theorists could enable to suggest that social agents, especially government and investors, produce, and reproduce visible spaces that gave shape and image to the city. Accordingly, space (and hence urbanization) in the city, is continually restructured. The process is determined by investors, who decide where they should open their businesses, factories etc. and by policies, controls and initiatives asserted by government which can change the landscape of the city. Government and investors interact to determine land prices and values that they capitalize on in augmenting profit. These forces represented major forms of social and economic inequalities in the city. Infrastructure provision, the outward expansion of the city, investment flows and undertakings, and restructuring of land uses were all manifestations of how investors and government swayed urban life and structure in the city. The importance of investment and city revenue were among the rationales forwarded in the perpetuation of inequality in distribution and utilization of resources, especially land.

There had been restructuring of residential settlements due to expropriation in relation with construction projects of stadium (which expropriated over 2000 households), convention center for the regional council, and the Martyrs Monument. Concentration of industrial establishments and business organizations in typical parts of the city (southern and western), neighborhood rehabilitation (especially in *kebele* 04, 05, 06, and 12) and condominium housing projects, and granting of residential land for real estate developers and other affluent groups (such as the diaspora) can all be good examples. Inequitable land provision is manifested in the city. As per interviews held in Bahir Dar City Administration (BDCA), there were more than 10,000 people registered for receiving residential lots before 2017. In 2017, BDCA brought 107 parcels of land for auction by which around 5,600 people bid for the land. Additionally, 189 associations were registered for securing over 4,585 residential lots. These people constituted the able to do residents of the city. The poor usually could not do anymore besides hoping for free-lot provision schemes and, as it is widely seen as the last resort, squatting on undeveloped pockets of land. High informal settlement in the city, indeed, is explained as a result of uneven and inequitable distribution of land. The plight of the poor never stops however. The city's government has been working hard to expropriate and control (and reserve for further auction for 'the able to dos' indeed) 'illegal' squats and private land holdings. In this regard, BDCA proudly reported that in 2017, it re-controlled 903 parcels of land that sized 720,352 m<sup>2</sup> of total area in to its land bank by displacing people (squat settlers) in *Dagemawi Menelik* and *Atse Tewodros kebeles*.

As discussed before, there has also been differential infrastructural provision across various *kebeles* of the city that has resulted in a discrepancy in land prices, livelihood structure and general living between the residents of the highly and less served *kebeles*. Thus, this phenomenon can illustrate social inequalities and uneven spatial development in the city. Such theorization, however, overlooks the importance of investment, capital (revenue) collection and accumulation for enhanced city development, and scarcity of land and other resources.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The study found that urbanism (and urban growth) in Bahir Dar city involved the dual features of 'community and cosmopolitanism'. Personal and intimate relationships, parochial and kinship based formation of networks and local forms of social organization, and other forms of interactions and activities that had high rural base and similarity characterize community-centered urban life. The growing importance of materialist and economic gain-centered goals,

superficiality and impersonality, life style changes, increasing diversity and its promotion, and informality were also manifestations of cosmopolitan strand of urbanism in the city. Although 'cosmopolitanism', as a feature of urban life, was thriving in the city, much was still characterized by high continuity of rural way of life and interaction, and, hence, by the sense of 'community' and 'identity'. It was also argued that investment, uneven spatial development, perpetuation of the intervention of city governance, and land use, management, and distribution patterns had been reflecting the inequality apparent in the path that urban growth in the city had gone through so far.

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