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# A study on the living condition and the housing problem in central Gondar, Ethiopia

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## Abstract

This paper aims at analysis of the housing conditions of a historical city Gondar in Ethiopia. Although rich in historical relics within a historical core formulated in the course of an imperial period since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the central zone of Gondar is suffering from the deterioration of urban blocks generated by a series of modern master planning since 1930's. Repeated field surveys *in situ* revealed the typological nature of built environment as well as social characteristics of inhabitants residing there. Dominance of female population, juxtaposition of shady occupation and historical monuments, concentration of the poor depending on the informal sector, are the main points abstracted from the surveys. Coordination within public housing is the key for the amelioration of actual situation.

**Key Words:** *Kebele*, Typology, Circular House, *Chikka* Construction, Informal Economy

## 1. Introduction

<Objective: Urban Problem of Gondar>



Fig.1 Location of Amhara Region (grey) and Gondar in Ethiopia

Gondar is an old capital of Ethiopia, which was founded by Emperor Fasilidas in the first

half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and flourished until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as an imperial seat of Ethiopia. Situated in the midst of hilly landscape in northern Amhara Region, this city dominates vast agricultural hinterlands stretching over this region [Fig.1]. The presence of an Imperial Castle, called *Fasil Ghebbi*, in the heart of the old city raised an international attention in terms of heritage conservation in an African country, which is exceptionally endowed with rich tradition of building culture, and came up with the registration on the World Heritage List of UNESCO in 1979.

However, the rapid population growth caused by high birth rate as well as massive immigration from rural areas after the end of 1960's made its living environment considerably serious. The petrol trade with Sudan and the investment by over-sea Ethiopians during last

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decade have improved its economy, and, thus, accelerated the immigration toward this city [Fig.2]. The authors have been engaged in the revision of its master plan since 2001 by the request of the Municipality and undertaken a series of surveys on urban problems of this city. This paper is closely related to such works targeting amelioration of housing condition in the central historical district.

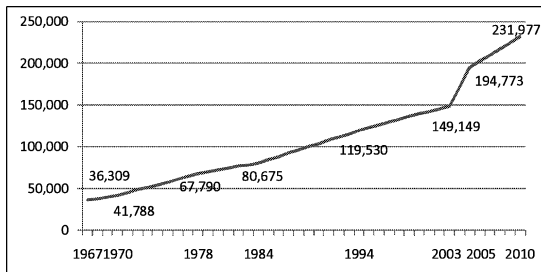


Fig.2 Population growth of Gondar since 1960's

#### <Method for Study>

To clarify the actuality of the housing issues in the central district, the authors' team designated a case study area within the central district and undertook field surveys by way of measuring all the constructions and the parcels, interviewing inhabitants, and referring to available planning and statistic documents preserved in the municipal office.

The target area consists of 2 blocks, comprising approximately 200 dwellings [Fig.3]. The initial full-scale field research was carried out in August-September 2003, following the preliminary one of March 2002, and the complementary one was done in August-September 2009, 4 years after the completion of the master plan revision. Once the precise site plan of the case study area, including detailed house unit plans, was completed, all the collected data concerning the attributes of the inhabitants (age, gender, religion, and ethnic group of heads of household) as well as their social characters (size of household, number of children, type of tenure, income, rent, house economy, and period of residence) were overlaid on it in order to



Fig.3 Central district of Gondar and the case study area, showing the division by *kebeles*

illustrate their distribution.

## 2. Deterioration in Central Gondar

The key to understand the Ethiopian urban issues from the governance point of view is the existence of *kebele*, as the last and the smallest administrative unit. The administrative system of Ethiopian cities as well as their land tenure was radically reorganized in 1974-1975 under *Derg* (military government) regime when the land became nationalized and the *kebele* system was introduced, possibly to strengthen the government control over the inhabitants on the neighbourhood level<sup>1</sup>. This *kebele* system is still maintained even after the collapse of the military government in 1991. One *kebele* comprises 7,000-10,000 inhabitants, corresponding to the size of the neighbourhood in the European sense.

Among 21 *kebeles* all over Gondar, the authors have focused on *Kebele 11*, which represents the most characteristic feature of the overcrowded central zone, neighbouring to

<sup>1</sup> In 1975 the new *Derg* government declared the nationalization of urban and rural lands as well as expropriation of extra houses. Landlords who possessed extra house must abandon it so as to hand it over to *kebele*. These collected houses were redistributed with low rent to those who had been excluded from the property ownership.

*Fasil Ghebbi*. The juxtaposition of a world heritage and slum-like poor dwellings sounds extremely strange, but such is the reality of African historical cities like Gondar. The target area which touches the outer wall of the castle compound covers 1.57ha, approximately 6% of its total surface of this *kebele*. Historically speaking, the surrounding area of the castle used to be occupied by nobles' residences, but the western part of this area has been apparently replaced by high-density smaller dwellings of the poor.



Fig.4 Aerial photo of Gondar taken by the Italians, 1936

The urban formation of Gondar was well analysed by Tomohiro Shitara, one of the authors' team members, in his doctor thesis published in 2008<sup>2</sup>. In accordance with the construction of the castle buildings by the emperors of Gondarite Dynasty, nobles settled in the surrounding area while the imperial families and their relatives resided in the castle compound. The eastern part of the surrounding area, called *Quagn Bet*, was reserved for higher class nobles and clergies while the western part, *Gira Bet*, came to be gradually occupied by lower class soldiers and their dependents, including even prostitutes. The aerial

photo of 1930's illustrates clearly these settlements around the castle before the implementation of modernized city planning [Fig.4]. Actually the eastern *Quagn Bet* still shows the feature of relatively well-established families while the western *Gira Bet* consists of a few circular shape masonry houses and a considerable number of humble mud-surfaced dwellings [Fig.5]. The pejorative expression of "Gira Gondare" (poor Gondarian), widely used in this region, has originated in the inhabitants of the latter<sup>3</sup>. As the target area is situated in the midst of this *Gira Bet*, the housing problem within it seems to have been historically generated.



Fig.5 Townscape of actual *Gira Bet* (Case study area)

Since no official document concerning the characters of the inhabitants was found in the municipal office, the research team started up two types of surveys respectively: one for examining the housing typology by measuring all the buildings in the case study area, another for collecting the data about the nature and the life of inhabitants by interviewing the locals. The relation between the social structure and the physical environment of this area would suggest the key for the understanding of the real problems of urban deterioration in the central district [Fig.6].

<sup>2</sup> Tomohiro Shitara "A Study on the Formation of Traditional Living Space and its Transformation by Modernization in Gondar", *Doctor thesis at Keio University*, 2008 (in Japanese)

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p.101

### 3. Typological Observation on Housing

As Gondar has enjoyed a long history as the seat of the imperial court since the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, not a few historical monuments are still kept within its urban fabrics. Besides the imperial buildings such as castles, detached palaces, baths and churches, nobles' residences represent the urban life of its flourishing period.



Fig.6 Site plan of the case study area in Kebele 11, showing each housing unit plan. The authors have measured 3 blocks within it.

Contrary to the imperial facilities, the typological feature of nobles' houses is rather simple: a masonry building with circular plan possessing four pillars within it [Fig.7]. Roofing is conic, as corresponding to its circular plan. It used to be thatched roof until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but most of them have been replaced by corrugated iron sheet roofing. Unfortunately, the historical value of such circular buildings has been long neglected as they were thought to be too vernacular and too conventional. In fact, the aerial photo of 1930's reveals that this type of circular houses was anywhere around the castle compound.

The authors' team confirmed the existence of 43 circular houses in the central district of Gondar [Fig.8]. 25 (60%) were found in Kebele 11 (*Gira Bet*) and Kebele 9 (*Arada*=market area). It is natural that such a historical place as *Gira Bet* maintains these old houses since the imperial period, but, strangely enough, only a few circular houses were found in the eastern zone of the *Fasil Ghebbi*, which was regarded as a residential quarter for high-class nobles and clergies.

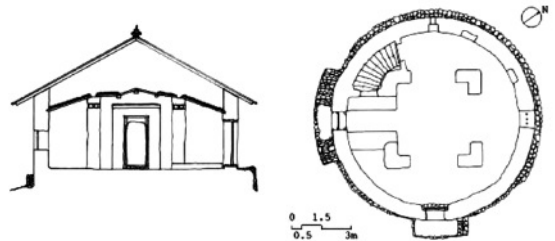


Fig.7 Circular house in Kebele 11

Tomohiro Shitara has tried a comparative study between existing circular houses and an old engraving executed by Achille Raffray, French entomologist<sup>4</sup>. The original drawing of Raffray was made upon his visit for scientific mission in 1873 [Fig.9]. This engraving is precise enough that the surrounding area of

<sup>4</sup> Achille Raffray (1844-1923), member of the Société entomologique de France and the Société de Géographie, made a scientific voyage to Ethiopia in 1873 and published "Voyage en Abyssinie, à Zanzibar et au pays des Ouanika", *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*, No.6 (1875)

*Fasil Ghebbi*, especially *Gira Bet*, is realistically drawn. Reconstitution of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century townscape by 3D modelling of this engraving confirms that at least 2 existing circular houses among 12 in *Kebele* 11 date back to this period<sup>5</sup>. After Gondar had lost its position as capital due to the decision of Emperor Tewodros II to move the capital to Debra Tabor in 1855, the city was attacked and sacked twice by the emperor's army, first in 1864 and then in 1866. These political upheavals made the city considerably devastated and many nobles and merchants were forced to leave from the city. The engraving of Raffray represents the town only 7 years after the second attack. Many nobles' buildings which had surrounded the castle were either destroyed or



Fig.9 Central Gondar in 1873, engraving by Achille Raffray

ruined. Therefore, the authors have to conclude that most of the current circular houses came to be reconstructed after this period except the two which are identified as existing on the occasion of Raffray's visit.

These nobles' houses are based on a round plan with the diameter of 9-12m. Four L-shaped masonry pillars as well as the surrounding circular wall support the wooden conic roof structure. Stones with irregular shape and size are rustically coursed by using mud as joint. Some have underground cellar accessed by staircase. This type of circular house is called *echage bet* in Amharic, literally meaning "bishop's house". Probably it must have originated from the fact that high-rank clergy lived in this type of masonry house in the early period of the Gondarite Dynasty although such clergy houses have already gone out in eastern *Quagn Bet*. The interview with the residents and neighbours proved the building age of each circular house. Before the Italian invasion of 1936, this circular house was common building type for the wealthy people, but after 1940's they were not constructed any more due to the diffusion of new building types which corresponds to new urban planning.

Other old houses constructed before the Italian invasion were mostly regarded as depending buildings to such high-class residences. They keep the tradition of masonry technique. In fact, 6 small depending buildings erected before the Italian occupation, currently used as

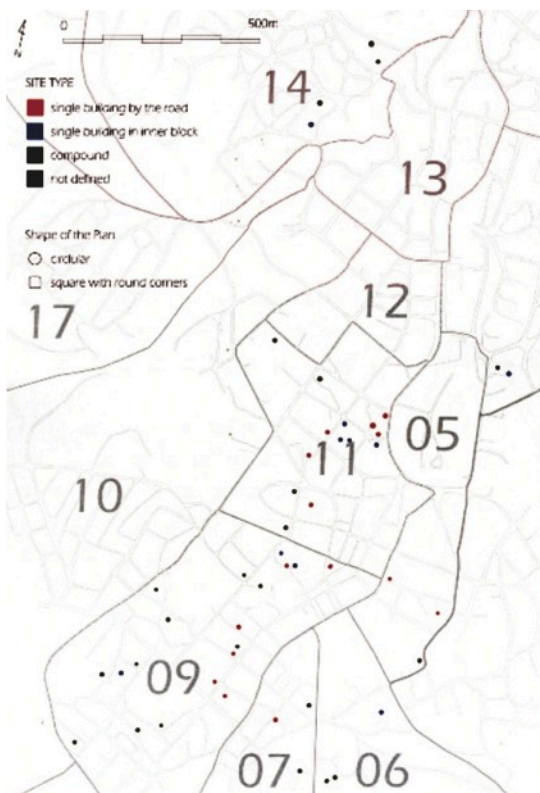


Fig.8 Distribution of circular houses in central Gondar. Investigation done by Tomohiro Shitara

<sup>5</sup> Tomohiro Shitara, *op.cit.* pp.92

dwelling, were detected in addition to 4 circular houses. Apparently these old buildings, circular and rectangular, were absorbed within the crowded urban fabrics and it may be difficult to recognize them at once. This concerns the change of circulation system after the Italian occupation period. Since the master plans executed respectively by the Italians (1936) and by the Haile Selassie's government (1967) designated the implementation of grid pattern street system in the central district, the conventional foot paths which connected these old houses have lost their significance within the newly generated urban blocks. Still it is not difficult to find out the traces of these organically stretching old paths.



Fig.10 Building type and structure

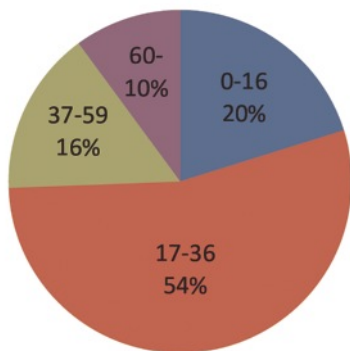


Fig.11 Building age (year after construction), percentage

Post-Italian buildings were principally laid out following the grid pattern. It should be noted that the notion of alignment appeared as

many new houses were lined on the border of streets and parcels. Until the middle of 1960's the building activity was not so strong as shown by the limited number of such buildings, but since the implementation of the new master plan by the Haile Selassie's government in 1967, the area was to be transformed to be more commercial on the street side and intensified its density behind these commercial buildings. Street side shops have been constructed by using solid structure, but most of the housing units inside the block were constructed by *chikka*, timber and mud structure, which is not at all durable [Fig.10]. The latter is in the form of row houses with a single room for one household (5m<sup>2</sup> in average). 74% of the buildings within the target area have been constructed after the new master plan [Fig.11]. The impression of this area as poor slum-like quarter comes from these overwhelmingly crowded *chikka* buildings as the majority of the dwellings [Fig.12].



Fig.12 Chikka house owned by Kebele 11

#### 4. Social Composition of Central Gondar

Following the analysis on the physical aspect of the case study area, the authors have examined the social characteristics of this area by analysing the data collected from the interviews. This area is heavily crowded with the population of 770 inhabitants and 208 house-

holds in summer 2003<sup>6</sup>. The density is approximately 490 person/ha. It is amazing that, as the preliminary survey carried out in March of the previous year showed the population of 630 inhabitants and 158 households in the same area, the population growth was 22% in 17 months<sup>7</sup>. On the contrary, the average size of a household was reduced from 4.4 (March 2002) to 3.7 persons (August 2003). *Kebele* 11 is, accordingly, considered to mark the highest density in whole Gondar. Even in 2009, this high density was still on the same level: 480 person/ha all over *Kebele* 11.

The questionnaire used for the interview had questions about attributes (age, gender, religion and ethnic group) of the head of the household, size of household, type of tenure, income, house economy, and period of residence in the area. Among 208 households, 158 answered the questions (76.0%). The interview was carried out *in situ* upon visit to their houses one by one. Most of the inhabitants were very welcoming, but some were reluctant to receive such investigators and to tell about their privacy. Some of them, accordingly, did not answer to certain questions.

It was proved that the inhabitants of this area show specific tendency. They are relatively aged and smaller in household size. The average age of the head of household is 45.9 years old. 24% of them are over 60 years old [Fig. 13]. In addition, 70% of the heads of household were female. This comes from the fact that majority of females here were single mothers or widows. The younger generation stands out in this respect: 78% of the heads of

household under 49 years old are females. The average number of children (under 19 years old) is 2.4, which is much smaller than the average of whole Gondar (5.6). Despite the extremely high birth rate in Ethiopia (5.55 in 2003, 6.12 in 2009), it is astonishingly low in this central district.

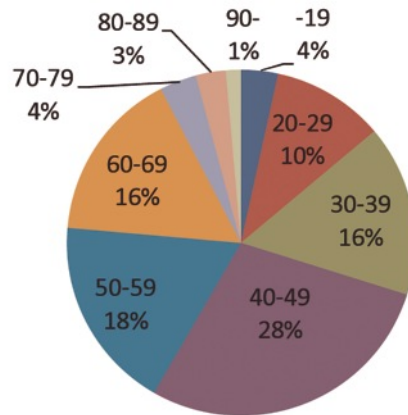


Fig.13 Age of heads of household, percentage

So long as the number of the inhabitants is concerned, the majority suffers from poverty [Fig.14]. 50% of the households here spend their lives with the income of less than 2,000 ETB (Ethiopian birr) per year (232.3US\$) although the average income of this area rises to 3,287 ETB (429.7 US\$)<sup>8</sup>. As the average income of whole Gondar in 2003 was 2,346 ETB (272.5 US\$), this central district is apparently occupied by two groups of income: very high or very low. Only 20% of the households earns more than 4,000 ETB and enjoy relatively stable life. 5 families among them (3 shop owners, 1 bar keeper and 1 doctor) had the income over 10,000 ETB per year. This upper income group is occupied with shop owners and professionals. Some families are able to spend relatively wealthy life thanks to the money transfer from their relatives in United States. The lower income group is either those who run

<sup>6</sup> Kyoko Homma, Yuko Otsubo, Riichi Miyake, Tomohiro Shitara "Study on the Hygiene Condition of the Central Dense Area in Gondar, Ethiopia" in *Bulletin of Architectural Institute of Japan*, F-2, 2004, pp.1505-1506

<sup>7</sup> Tomohiro Shitara "A Study on the Transformation of Urban Structure and Distribution of Historical Architecture in Gondar" in *Bulletin of Architectural Institute of Japan*, F-2, 2004, pp.257-258 (in Japanese)

<sup>8</sup> 1 US\$ used to be 8.61 ETB (Ethiopian birr) in November 2003. It was 12.99 ETB in March 2010.

small business at home or those who depend on the informal sector. The former consists of small shop keepers and workers who use their dwellings as workshops while the latter is street sellers and prostitutes. Both are mostly occupied by females.

The presence of bar keepers who run bars and alcohol shops is peculiar in this area. As mentioned before, *Gira Bet* has been known as a shady “gar trade” quarter through the last century. Among 24 bars and alcohol shops detected in the target area, 2 types should be distinguished: one who has resided here and run the business for more than 30 years, another who has settled this area just recently to open their own bar. The former group depends on a *kebele*-rented *chikka* house while the latter has rented a privately owned house. A few are suffering from very low income, but the most of bar keepers receive relatively high income.



Fig.15 Type of tenure

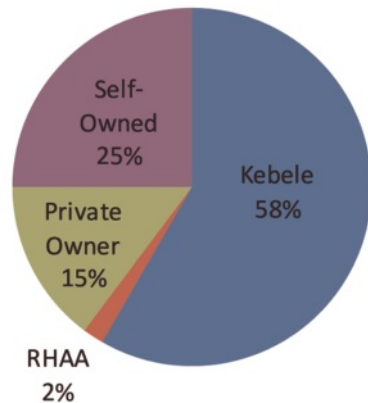


Fig.16 Type of tenure, percentage

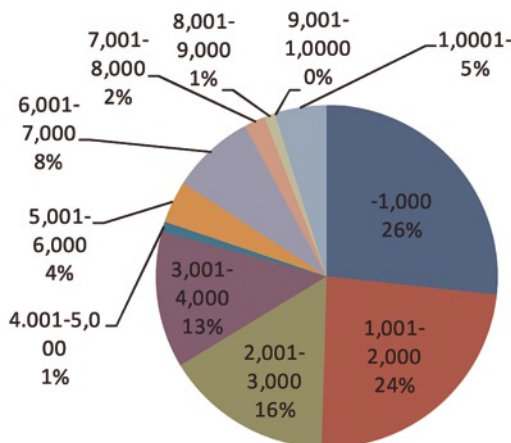


Fig.14 Income (ETB), percentage

## 5. Type of Tenure

The type of tenure has specific tendency here [Fig.15, 16]. 25% of the inhabitants still keep the ownership of their houses<sup>9</sup>. The majority

of the rest is either public housing (60%) or rental housing from private owners (15%). Public housing here does not mean standardized collective housing as seen in Europe or in Asia.

Most of them belong to *kebele* (58%) while others are owned by RHAA (Rental Housing Administrative Agency, 2%) which is under the federal government<sup>10</sup>. The radical land

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any other means. About 28.86% houses were rented from *kebeles*, 19.8% from private households, and 17% from public housing agency. The proportion of owner occupied/rented occupied coincides to that in *Kebele 11*, shown by the authors' survey. Bekele Melese “Influence Area and Municipal Service Study”, *Report presented to the Municipality*, Gondar, 2002

<sup>10</sup> Yuko Otsubo, Riichi Miyake, Tomohiro Shitara, Kyoko Homma “Study on the Housing Policy in Gondar, Ethiopia, and its Reality” in *Bulletin of Architectural Institute of Japan*, F-2, 2004, pp.259-260 (in Japanese)

<sup>9</sup> The census of 1994 reveals the type of tenure of the housing stock in Gondar. 41.1% houses were owner occupied and the remaining was rented of occupied by



reform during *Derg* period forced each household to limit their house ownership to one. All the surplus houses were nationalized. Newly established *kebele* administration was then handed over these expropriated houses and assigned them for public housing for the sake of lower income people. This is the reason why *kebele* runs public housing business all over its territory.

The annual house rent for *kebele* housing in the target area is only 46.5 ETB (5.40 US\$) in average. This extremely low rent enables poorer inhabitants to afford their lives in such *kebele* housing. They live in a humble house unit with the average surface of 23.1m<sup>2</sup>, 2/3 of which are made of *chikka*. Most of *kebele* houses, accordingly, suffer from bad housing condition. In addition, inhabitants are not interested in maintenance or repair of such a house that is not their own property. The lack of appropriate maintenance worsens the situation. Concerning the 4 circular houses existing in the target area, 2 were expropriated and handed over to *Kebele* 11.

On the contrary, private rental housing has become more active than before. This comes from the change of the housing policy by the new government. Those who used to reside in this area and moved to new houses outside were allowed to keep their extra houses so that they have started private rental housing business. The rent is much higher: 1020 ETB (118.5US\$) per year or 85 ETB per month in average in the target area. This big difference between the public and the private housing businesses is directly related to the co-existence of two different groups in this target area: one spending their live in an informal sector or in poorly equipped workshops and another who enjoy relatively well-established housing conditions.

## 6. Characteristics of Residents in Central Gondar

Summing up the social and physical charac-

ters of the inhabitants and their dwellings in central Gondar, it is worth classifying the types of the inhabitants. The following 7 types are supposed to be most outstanding.

- (1) Active and relatively wealthier shop owners: These people run shops alongside streets. They have settled here since the master plan of 1967 and constructed their shops or hotels (*bunnabet*), observing the new urban planning framework. Some of them are now enlarging their business size as this location has high potential for future development related with tourism industry. Reinforced concrete constructions combined with shops are the major type. The heads of household are rather male.
- (2) Old landlords possessing old houses: This group of old inhabitants have resided here for a long time, some for generations since the Gondarite Dynasty period. They possess their residence (circular and other stone houses). Some family members have left for foreign countries, mainly for United States, as *diaspora*, whose money transfer supports their comfortable life in the city centre<sup>11</sup>. The heads of household are generally female.
- (3) Bar keepers running night business in their own houses: These people, mostly aged females, run their bar business by serving local beer (*tella*) and other alcohol drinks in their own houses. They have occupied this area since long time ago, so that this quarter has become one of the most well-known night spots in

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<sup>11</sup> 1.5 million Ethiopians live outside of the country, emigrating because of political persecution or natural disaster. Called Ethiopian *diaspora*, they have formulated their own communities in respective country. In Washington D.C., the biggest community comprising 100,000–300,000 inhabitants marks a new powerful minority model in US. Mai Asami “Study on the Community Consciousness of Ethiopian *Diaspora* in the Metropolitan Area of Washington D.C.”, *Report for Mori Foundation Grant*, Keio University, 2008 (in Japanese)

Gondar. They are mainly rich, but considered to be in a shady business closely related with prostitution. New comers are joining in this business.

(4) Office workers living in private housing:

As private housing business has become active due to the introduction of free market economy, a certain number of houses came to be used for this purpose. Those who are employed as secretaries or clerks form a new group of residents in this area, but the deteriorated housing condition of this area reduces the attraction of this area for the new comers. The period of residence is very short.

(5) Small shop keepers and workers:

A certain number of the inhabitants, mostly females, run small business at home, either running a small shop (kiosk) or providing services as a workshop. Their income is low, but thanks to the favourable location of the site in the very centre of the city, facing on the street line, they are able to keep their business without interruption. They are thinking to enlarge their business if the economy of Gondar allows in future.

(6) Street sellers depending on informal sector:

The biggest part of the inhabitants in this area is the group of street sellers, mostly female. They reside in *kebele*-owned *chikka* house units inside the blocks, mainly row houses with minimum surface, and are obliged to find daily works on the street. Their income is extremely low. They prefer staying here because of job opportunity even though the municipality tries to persuade them to move to alternative houses in newly developed zones.

(7) Hard-working single mothers, but depending on prostitution:

A certain number of younger women residing in this area are obliged to earn by prostitution. They are either divorced or unmarried mother with children. The presence of bars and alcohol shops facilitates their busi-

ness. The average period of residence is short as this type of women is coming in and out frequently. The youngest case here is a woman of 16 years old, who has to take care of her child and brothers and sisters.

The common feature is that the area is characterized by the presence of a typical woman-headed society. The low income group, the bar keepers group and even the old landlord group represent the dominance of female heads of household. Only shop owners are occupied by male heads of household. Taking into consideration that the proportion of male/female in Gondar is 50.1/49.9 in 2005, the dominance of female population in the city centre is very exceptional. The peculiarity of this quarter as a traditional drinking place and the convenience as an urban centre are thought to be two main driving forces for this phenomenon. Each resident group has different interest and prospect for their future. So far, so long as the *kebele*-owned housing occupies the majority, the *kebele* administration holds the key for the coordination of these different groups<sup>12</sup>.

## 7. Conclusion

The result of the overall survey on the case study area in *Kebele* 11 is very meaningful in terms of the destiny of a historical district in a developing country like Ethiopia. The ongoing process of deterioration in central districts may remind of a typical “inner city” phenomenon, but the case of central Gondar differs slightly from it because of its peculiar

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<sup>12</sup> *Kebele* administration is in charge of public housing, schools and nursery service, welfare for HIV patients and orphans, issue of ID card, management of shops and forests belonging to them, sales of trees and grass on their own territory and so on. Some *kebeles* possessing their own properties are considered to have a capacity of enlarging its business *Kebele* 11, which is in possession of 100 houses actually, is very active in housing business. Yuko Otsubo, Riichi Miyake, Tomohiro Shitara, Kyoko Homma, *op.cit.* pp.259-260

urban formation process as a historical imperial city which embraces court tradition.

The fact that this area, *Gira Bet*, has been a special “gay trade” zone is suggestive. A certain number of bar keepers have run their business since long time ago. This may be another aspect of Gondarian urban history. Co-existence of precious historical monuments and a shady drinking place, neighbouring each other, is often pointed out in many cities, but here the contrast is apparently too much. Such a shady place is not at all favourable in terms of provision of safe and reliable shelters for those who have been excluded from appropriate housing.

The surveys have brought about new findings about historical remains such as circular buildings and foot paths of the past age in the city centre. The actual urban structure is very different from that of the imperial period. The successive implementation of new master plans since the Italian occupation period has resulted in completely different urban spaces and townscape.

The urban planning of Gondar has been developed on the basis of such modernized urban theory, but little attention has been paid to the once-existing organic urban fabrics. The urban policy of overlapping grid pattern street system on the old urban layers around the castle has not been successfully achieved because of the rapid immigration of a considerable number of poor people into these urban blocks. This area has thus provided convenient shelters for those who are obliged to depend on informal economy without appropriate means for regular income.

Since this area is one of the most important cultural zones in historical Ethiopia, careful process of rehabilitation equipped with appropriate measures to remove these social constraints should be programmed among the stakeholders. It is strongly expected that the collected data and the analysis shown here would contribute a lot for future amelioration of living and housing conditions in such a historical city as Gondar.