

# Religious tourism potential of Gishen Derbe Kerbe Mariam, Ethiopia

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## Abstract

The main purpose of this research is to assess religious tourism potential of Gishen Mariam, in Ethiopia. Data was collected through self-administered questionnaires, direct/participant observation, informal discussions and by managing secondary data. Categorical, explanatory and descriptive methods of qualitative data analysis techniques were employed for data interpretation. Eleven resources were identified as potential attractions for religious tourism development in the study area. Except for the museum which was under construction, resources such as landscape and scenery, religious festivals, church buildings, history of Gishen Mariam, holy water, the cave of king Lalibela, and the Natural cave were being utilized by and rated as attractive resources by the majority of respondents. Almost all the resources have utilized by domestic tourists alone. The article describes the splendors of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church landscape and argues that this unique spiritual area should be accessible to both international and domestic tourists.

**Key words:** Religious Tourism, Gishen, Potential

## INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism is as old as the religion itself and consequently it is the oldest form of tourism in the world (Karar, 2010; Rinschede, 1992). Every religion requires movement from 3place to place. As a matter of fact 60% of the world's population practices religions out of which 300-330 million visit world key religious sites (UNWTO, 2011). The most visited destinations in the world are Israel, Saudi Arabia and Italy. Religious tourism destinations are either pilgrimage shrines

(places that serve as the goal of religiously motivated journeys from beyond the immediate locality), or religiously significant sites with historic and/or artistic importance; and or religious festivals with religious associations (Nolan and Nolan, 1992, p. 69). Religious tourism is a type of tourism whose participants are motivated either in part or exclusively for religious reasons (Rinschede, 1992). Religious tourism is foreign exchange earner. Through spurring investments in new infrastructure; bringing competition between local firms and firms in

other tourist countries; stimulating other economic industries through direct, indirect and induced effects; it generates employment and increases income, causes positive exploitation of economies of scale in national firms (Cohen, 1984; Karar, 2010; Pratt, 2011; Vuconic, 1998).

The EOTC (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church) holds many historical and religious treasures that are internationally significant. However, few are recognized and visited by both international and domestic tourists. Whereas many of them that could be listed under UNESCO world heritage are not well recognized and still not visited. One of these is Gishen Debre Kerbe Mariam Church, ancient historic, full of tourism potential site and one of the top pilgrimage sites in Ethiopia. Gishen comprises both spiritual and secular attractions in it; presence of Jesus Christ's Cross, red Scarlet robe (Mathew 27:28), Holy water that came from river Jordan, holy icons that were originally painted by the Apostles John and Luke, the covenant given to pilgrims and *Kura'ate Re'esu* (Dagnachew Kassahun, 2006), Saint George Cave and church are some of the spiritual attractions while landscape beauty of Gishen, history of Mount Gishen (Bantalem Tadesse, 2010), inhabitant's culture are some of the secular attractions. All these resources or attractions could attract both pilgrims and tourist.

Gishen receives 350,000-500,000 domestic pilgrims and/or religious tourists each year (WHO, 2010). Once known scientifically they then should be developed into tourism products so as to benefit the local community and the church. Ethiopia's religious tourism potential is not well studied and it has not yet gained much attention by either the government or the people.

However, Government and NGOs are focusing on enabling local communities and sustaining their lives through agriculture (safety-net programs) and they sadly do not see tourism's potential in fostering the local economy as they could. Rotherham (2007) has stated that religious tourism is one important engine for improving the local economy. From a religious heritage conservation point of view, religious tourism development in such a heritage rich area could also sustain the church heritage conservation initiatives.

Hence religious tourism should be viewed as an alternative to improving the local community's economy and to conserve the proud heritage of the area. Thorough investigation of the potential of the area for religious tourism is a precondition for such a decision. The main purpose of this research is to assess the religious tourism potential of Gishen Debre Kerbe Mariam.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Site Description**

Gishen Debre Kerbe Mariam is located 482 km north of Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, in Amhara regional state, South Wollo zonal administration, Ambasel Woreda (equivalent to county) (see figure 1). It is located in a cross shaped mountain with an altitude of more than 3000 meters above sea level. It has an area of 26 hectare, of which 90% of the land is suitable for building whereas the rest 10% requires study. Since the cross shaped mountain is surrounded by hills, expanding its ownership down the mountain is unthinkable hence the only option remains utilizing the available land appropriately.

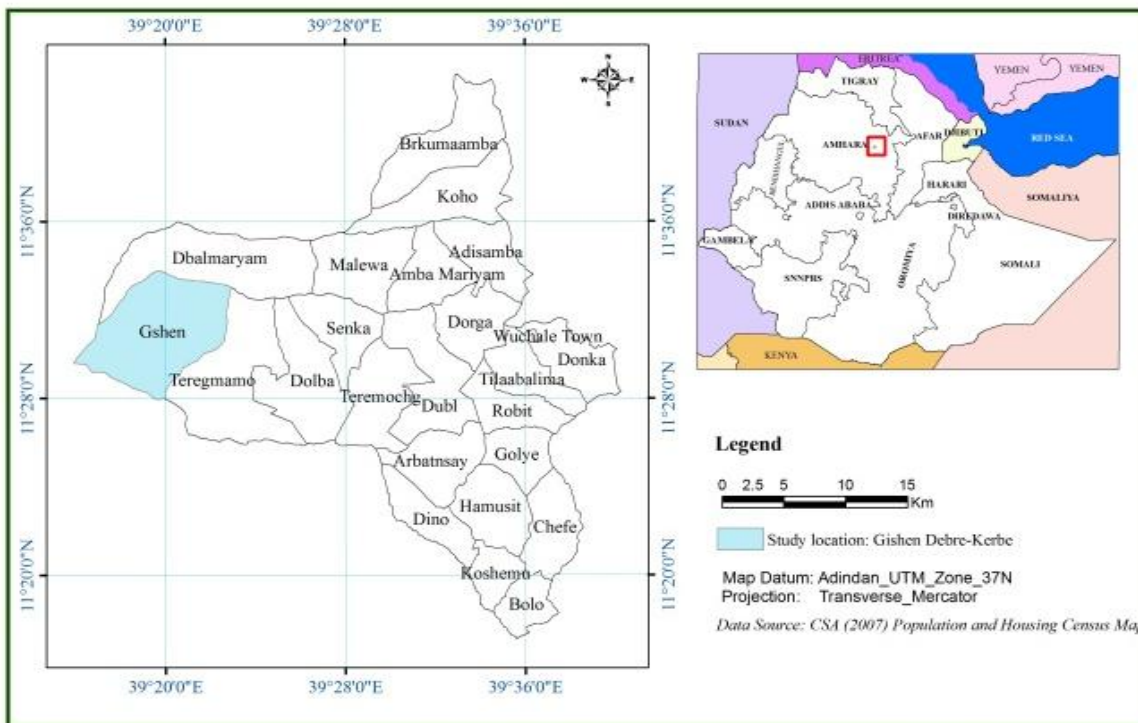


Figure 1: Location map of Gishen in Ambasel woreda (left) and in Ethiopia (right) (developed by authors)

### Data Collection Instruments

#### Self-Administered Questionnaire Survey:

this was made with pilgrims/tourists in order to analyze their opinions over the potential resources that are available. The questionnaire was prepared in English and Amharic. It was pre-tested and amended before the actual questionnaire survey was made. 177 participants in this survey were chosen non-randomly using available sampling technique.

**Key Informant Interviews:** were held with church leaders, church scholars and local elders in order to obtain information related to each available resource. The semi-structured interviews with local residents provided information about the potential of Gishen for tourism development in general and religious tourism in particular.

**Observation (passive and active):** was made in order to enumerate and take inventory of religious tourism resources and

products. The researcher also spent the last eight years as a continuous participant and made observations on the annual festival of *Meskerem 21* (October 1) which was used as an input to this research.

**Secondary Data:** was used and managed in order to see and analyze arrival trends in different years and months. Secondary data sources such as audio and video media were used including: preaching, documentary films and spiritual songs; both secular and spiritual books; magazines and newsletters; report and research papers; leaflets and other important resources were used.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to gather data from religious tourists and/or pilgrims, 200 samples were taken non-randomly. But only 177 filled questionnaires were taken into analysis. Out of the 177 respondents, 63% of them were male and 37% were female. In terms of age

composition, majority of respondents were between the age of 18 and 30 (50.6%), followed by age groups between 30 and 45 age (37.6%), above 45 (9.6%) and below 18 (2.2%). Except two respondents who did not mention their religious affiliation, all respondents were EOTC religion followers. In terms of their origin, 68 % were from Addis Ababa whereas 32% were from 30 different towns of Ethiopia. Hence it can be said that 100% respondents were from Ethiopia. International visitors were not seen during the study on either of the two top festivals (October and January). This indicates that there are more things to be done in order to attract international visitors. 90% of respondent were religiously motivated whereas 7% and 3% were motivated by both and non-religious factors respectively. Maximum length of stay was nine days whereas the minimum length of stay was an overnight. Average length of stay of respondents was 6 days. Mode and median is 5.5 days. However, this doesn't represent pilgrims or religious tourists who went on January or other time of the year. Respondent behavior in terms of their organization, 53.1% were in groups, 18.6% with friends, 17.5% with family and those who visit Gishen Mariam alone were 10.7% of the respondents. The result found agreed with the finding of Rinschede (1992) stated "the least group are those who come alone". Organized group trip is organized by parish churches, Sunday schools and spiritual associations.

In general 70% of the respondents were at least for their second time and at most for their 20<sup>th</sup> time. This implies that many of the respondents at least know about the study area more than one time and have knowledge about Gishen Mariam. Therefore, the questions that were prepared were filled with knowledge.

## **RELIGIOUS TOURISM POTENTIAL OF GISHEN**

### **Landscape and Scenery**

Almost all *Ambasel* district is endowed with spectacular mountainous chains. The landscape of Gishen Mariam is unique and very beautiful and that could attract both nature based and culture based tourists. To the researcher's knowledge, Gishen is the only cross shaped mountain plateau which has an altitude of more than 3000 meters in the world. The entrance to the plateau is the only one, and there is no another way to go up (the first picture in figure 2). Before the invasion and subsequent damage by *Gragn* Ahmed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the main entrance of Gishen Mariam was through the current position of church of Archangel Saint Urael.

Today's main entrance is through the head of the cross which is built by Empress Menen (Interview, 01-2013). The cross shaped mountainous landscape signifies the presence of the True Cross. If one looks at the mountain from air it seems manmade cross (the second picture in figure 2). It also looks like Jesus crucified and bowed his head after he gave up his ghost as the Holy Bible tell, "...When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, it is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost." (John 19:30).

Besides Gishen's landscape, the landscape formation and different types of land use from *kutaber* through Gishen are spectacular and eye-catching for tourists. Moreover surrounding landscape formation is incredible especially looking from the top of the mountain. The mountains of *Meqdela*, *Delanta* and *Tenta* are other landscape features that give Gishen Mariam more importance for tourist trekkers besides religious tourists.

Though only provided during festival season on *Meskerem* (September); mountain trekking, horse riding, scenic viewing and photo-graphing have been practiced by pilgrims. Possible additional products include; research and education, bird watching, etc. For trekkers on their way to

Gishen from *kutaber* they face two challenging mountains called *Wollo-Ber* and *Qogat* Mountain.

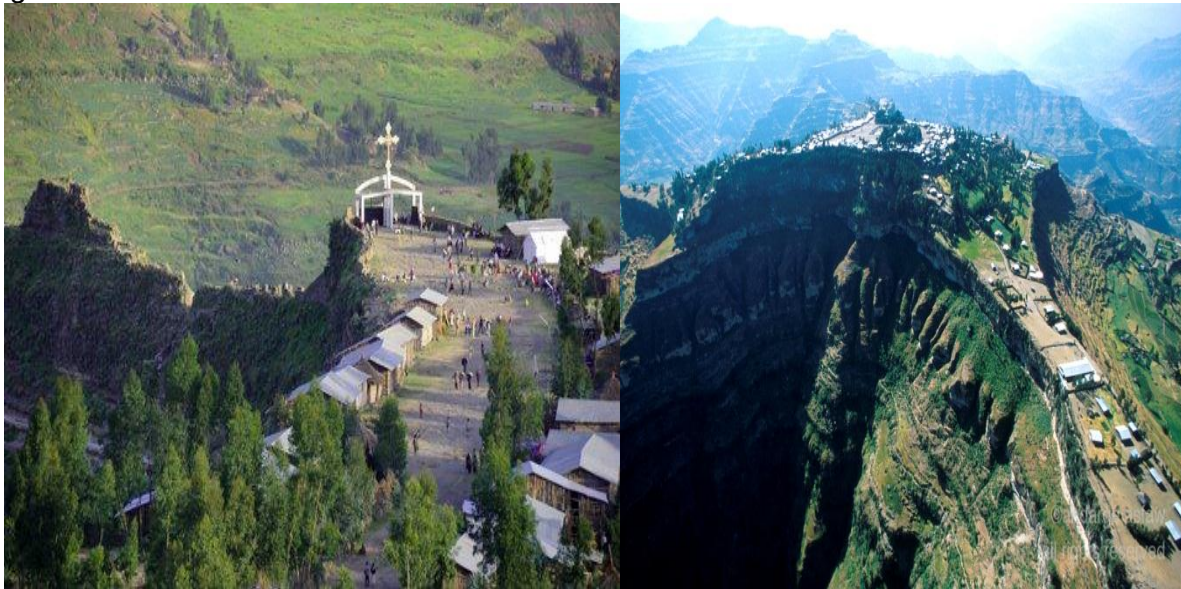


Figure 2: The Landscape and the Scenery (Photo by Author and Amaretech, 2013)

## Religious Festival

According to Nolan and Nolan (1992), religious festivals are a component of religious tourism attractions. In this regard, Gishen has a lot to provide to the religious tourists. There are five churches; each comprising at most three arks commemorated each month with their annual celebrations. The most important, unique and colorful festivals celebrated in Gishen are *Meskerem 21*, *Tir 21* (January 29) and *Megabit 10* (*Mesqel*: one of the sub religious festivals of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church).

The Festival celebrated each year on *Meskerem 21* (October 1) is for two reasons; Firstly, it is the date whereby Emperor Zera'a Ya'iqob (reigned 1434-1468 (Tadesse Tamirat, 1972)) finished building the church and celebrated entrance of the True Cross to Gishen, and secondly, it is the monthly commemoration date of Saint Mary. The second most popular festival at

Gishen Mariam is *Astere'o Mariam*, celebrated on *Tir 21* (January 29) commemorating the death of Saint Mary. Wedding ceremonies on January 29 are common occurrences. Those who wish to see how the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church Wedding ceremony is conducted could go and attend the ceremony. The third and less common is the *Mesqel* festival which is celebrated on September 26 and 27 each year to commemorate the finding of the True Cross. It is also celebrated on Megabit 10 to commemorate the discovery of the True Cross by St Helena.

Moreover, an explanation by the Sebeka Gubae for when, how and why the church service is offered in Gishen Mariam, is stated as follows:

*Every day there is Sebhate Fikur prayer, the first week of every month there is community prayer, on every Sunday and monthly Saints' memorial-day especially every months*

of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> days (in Ethiopian Calendar) there is mass service (Interview, 01-2013).

Thus, religious tourist can get church services at any time of the year they go. Presence of such festival could encourage visitors make travel to Gishen at any time of the year. Religious festivals in EOTC in general and Gishen Mariam in particular are celebrated according to the Holy Bible (1<sup>st</sup> Chronicles 15:16)

### Church Buildings

There are five churches situated in different parts of the flat area at the top of the cross Shape Mountain. They are described as follows.

### Igziabher-Ab Church

*Igziabher-Ab* (God the Father) church was first built in 517 E.C. by a church father called Abba *Fekade-Kiristos* or Felix (who came from Greece). The first church design was similar to the grassy huts found in the rural Amhara region. Before Emperor Zera'a Ya'iqob rebuilt the church of *Igziabher-Ab* and decorated it with expensive minerals such as gold and diamond (enqu), the

church was renewed by different kings such as Yikuno-Amlak. Since then according to *Mergeta Yemane-Birhan*, the church was renewed by Emperor *Sertse-Dingle* (r: 1563-1597), Emperor *Adiam-Seged Eyasu* (r: 19 July 1682-13 October 1706), Emperor *Tekle-Giorgis*, Ras Ali and Emperor Minilik II in different periods (interview, 01-2013).

According to the Ethiopian Heritage Research and Conservation Authority (EHRCA), the current design of *Igziabher-Ab* church (the first picture in figure 3) was brought from Jerusalem by Emperor *Minilik II* and built accordingly by King Michael of Wollo (the second picture in figure 3). As showed in picture 3 below, the church has a cross shape design which is classified under one of the four types of EOTC church buildings design called *Igre Mesqel* (foot of cross).

The True Cross and other sacred materials that had brought with it are deposited in this church. Inside the holy of holies, there are different icons that narrate the story of the True Cross (interview and discussion). Only men are allowed to enter and get church service inside this church.



Figure 3: Design and church of Igziabher-Ab (photos by AWCT and Author, 2013)

### Saint Mary Church

Saint Mary Church is round shape decorated with different colors (see figure 4). It was first built by Emperor Yikuno-Amlak in 1275 in order to make Gishen accessible for both men and women to enter and participate in any service of the church. This church was used initially by

only women. Many religious tourists used this church for their shelter and prayer sessions. The church was renewed in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by *Emahoy* (title given to nuns) Eleni who was sister of Emperor Zera'a Ya'iqob and Empress Menen respectively. Like *Igziabher-Ab Church* this church is also decorated with different paintings.



Figure 4: Saint Mary Church (photo by Author, 2013)

### Archangel Saint Michael Church

Archangel Saint Michael Church (figure 5) was built in 1953 by the Archbishop of Gondar Diocese *Abune Michael*. This church is situated on west side of the cross shaped mountain of Gishen Mariam, in other words, the church was situated on the foot of the cross (imagine that cross lay on ground). Though one prominent informant of the church agreed with the presence of the

church but he was not happy with its position on the cross shape mountain (interview, 01-2013). He would have preferred it if the church was situated at the right side of the cross where church of the Archangel Saint Gabriel is now situated, because EOTC teachings state: "Saint Michael stands on the right side of Saint Mary whereas Saint Gabriel is on the left side of Saint Mary". Indeed, if it was situated in this way the church situation would teach

more people about the church teachings. An informant from the *Sebeka Gubae* of Gishen Mariam said, “There are two arks called *Lideta* (birth of Saint Mary) and *Abune Tekle-Haymanot* commemorated on 1<sup>st</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> days of each month of the year respectively” (interview, 01-2013). The unique feature of this church building

besides paintings is that the color of the outside wall of the church which show miraculous color changes: bright yellow and dark yellow (observation, 09-2012). Church of Saint George and visitors’ way are seen from this church. In tourism terms it is called the ‘viewing- point’.



Figure 5: Archangel Saint Michael Church (photo by Author, 2013)

### Archangel Saint Gabriel Church

Archangel Saint Gabriel church was built in 1995 by a volunteer team of husband and wife named Ato Yimesgen G/Egziabhier and W/ro Aberash Nigussie. This church has a round shape, and is situated on the right hand of the cross shaped mountain (see figure 6). It was built to commemorate the Archangel Gabriel on every 19<sup>th</sup> day of the month.



Figure 6: Church of Archangel Saint Gabriel (photo by Author, 2013)



### Archangel Saint Urael Church

The new and the fifth church called Archangel Saint Urael church (see figure 7) was built and started providing religious service for pilgrims in January 30, 2013. It is situated near to the main gate of the cross shaped Mountain. The structure of this church is similar to that of Saint Mary's church. The church was built in the name of

Archangel Urael for his contribution as one of the seven Archangels who led Abbot *Fekade-Kiristos* (Felix) and Emperor Zera'a Ya'iqob to find Gishen Mariam; He is the angel who blessed and glorified Gishen with the blood of Jesus Christ, and gave it to Saint Mary (key informant interview, 01-2013). The Archangel is commemorated on 22<sup>nd</sup> day of each month of the year.



Figure 7: Archangel Saint Urael church (photo by Ayalew, 2013)

### Secular and Religious History of the Site

#### Before the coming of the True Cross

The history in this period covers from creation of our world until coming of the True Cross in the 15<sup>th</sup> C. According to Zemedkun Bekele (2007) and Mergeta Yemane-Birhan (interview, 01-2013), Gishen was protected by Saint Angles until 522 AD. But later on in 525 Gishen became place where people started to live following its establishment as a monastery by a monk called *Fekade-Kiristos* or Felix with King Kaleb (The last major Axumite King of

Ethiopia ruled from 514-543 AD) (<http://www.dacb.org/stories/ethiopia/kaleb2.html>) by the order of God the Lord revealed in his vision. While he was establishing Gishen as a monastery he built the church of *Igziabher-Ab* with the Ark of Saint Mary and *Igziabher-Ab* which were brought from Yemen. Gishen remained as the main mens monastery until the reign of Yikuno-Amlak who built Saint Mary Church in order to access Gishen for both sexes.

The mountain has had different names before it was called Gishen. Until the arrival of king Lalibela to Gishen, the mountain was

called *Debre Negodguad*. This name was given because roaring was heard on the top of the mountain (interview, 02-2013). Following the coming of Lalibela an attempt was made to build a temple of God the Father by excavating a cave on the mountain side. The name was changed to *Debre Igziabher* (Zemedkun, 2007). After a few years, the name was again changed for the third time to *Debre Negest* meaning mountain of 'royal families', during the reign of Emperor Yekuno-Amlak. This name *Debre Negest* was given because nearly 590 royal families attended school on the top of mountain (interview, 01-2013). However, the reason given for "why *Debre Negest* was given to Gishen" by Tadesse Tamirat (1972) as stated in his book of church and the state, seems contradictory:

*Before coming of the true cross Gishen Mariam was serving as royal prison due to its unique geographical isolation during medieval time. Even following the death of Emperor Yikuno-Amlak Gishen was used for imprisoning distant relatives of the deceased king in order to prevent them from their active role in struggle for succession. During this time Gishen was called as Debre Negest (mountain of royal family) (Tadesse Tamirat, 1972).*

But from a logical reasoning, both reasons could be true. Because the former lacks the information as to why royal families exclusively attend school at Gishen while the latter, also lacks info on whether the successors become a king, with or without education. Hence, it is possible to predict that Gishen was used as a school for royal families because royal families were kept in seclusion due to its geographical isolation and this would make for keeping of the peace at that time. A successor of the deceased king was selected from imprisoned royal families to become a king and lead the country with the knowledge he acquired at Gishen Mariam. Therefore, from these premises it can be concluded that the

name *Debre Negest* was given for both reasons.

The current name of mount Gishen is *Debre Kerbe* meaning place of Cross, given following the coming and burring of True Cross inside the Holy of Holies of Church *Igziabher-Ab*.

In general mount Gishen is the living heritage for both Zagwe and Solomonic Dynasties of Ethiopia. Because King Lalibela who belonged to the Zagwe Dynasty built a church and Emperors who reigned starting from Yikuno-Amlak had passed their legacy to their successors and are from the restored Solomonic dynasty. According to Tadesse Tamirat (1972), Mount Gishen was used as royal prison for about 176 years (1270-1446). It is the place from which Ethiopian peace was maintained during the medieval period and served as a political center. This history could make Gishen Mariam a 'living laboratory' for studying Ethiopian History.

### **During and After the Coming of True Cross**

According to book of *Tefut* and EOTC taught, Emperor Dawit II (1382-1412) was the king who brought the True Cross from Egypt. In order to get the True Cross from the then Alexandria, Emperor Dawit II was beseeched to free Pope Michael the Alexandrian from the Egyptian Muslim leader. He then, with the support of Ethiopian monks and abbots stopped the Blue Nile River from flowing down to Egypt. His intention was at first just to free the pope, but later this changed to get the True Cross from Alexandria. However, Egyptian Christians and the ruler of the time initially sent gold and other expensive minerals as bounty to Emperor Dawit II. They were forced to send him the True Cross with other sacred materials once they realized that Emperor Dawit was not going to let the Blue Nile River to flow again unless he obtained the True Cross. Emperor Dawit on his return from receiving the True Cross dreamed that after letting the Blue Nile

River flow down to Egypt the True Cross would need to be kept on a suitable Cross like Mountain similar to Golgotha, or a place, written in Ge'ez as “ይነብር መስቀል ቦዲበ መስቀል (*Yinebir Mesqelye Bedibe Mesqel*)”. Unfortunately he fell from his mule (horse) and died on his way back home in Sinar (book of *Tefut*).

After nearly twenty years since the death of Emperor Dawit II, his youngest son Emperor Zera'a Ya'iqob (1434-1468) took power and brought the True Cross and other sacred materials to Ethiopia. The sacred materials brought from Egypt and Jerusalem are; Icons of Saint Mary and *Kura'ate Re'esu*, Ark of Saint Michael and the True Cross brought by Emperor Dawit II until Sudan; and *sprung*, crown of thorns and Scarlet Robe (Mathew 27:28) brought by Emperor Zera'a Ya'iqob to Ethiopia.

Emperor Zera'a Ya'iqob was ordered by the Lord to put and keep the True Cross on a place or a mountain of Cross, saying “አንብር መስቀል ቦዲበ መስቀል (*Anbir Mesqelye Bedibe Mesqel*)”. As soon as he arrived in Ethiopia he started searching for a place that would be suitable for putting and keeping the True Cross. After his third trial, led by Saint Urael the Archangel, he found Gishen and regarded it as a suitable place. He then built a church and deposited all the sacred materials including the True Cross in the church of *Igziabher-Ab*. The True Cross and sacred materials were put as follows: first they were put in a box of gold; second the box of gold was put in a silver box; third, the silver box was put in an iron box; fourth, the iron box was put in another iron box; and finally the iron box was put in a bronze box and this was stamped by the king of kings and was put in a bed made from ivory.

Since that time, the True Cross and other sacred materials had never been accessible to the public or even to the top church leaders. According to an informant from the church, the True Cross and the other sacred materials were not to be manifested to the

public (interview, 01-2013). The reason for this is believed to be that it is an instruction from God not to allow access to His Cross and for the world to see. In addition, the informant also said that the power of the Cross is very great that can destroy our world (*Meqseft*), if one tries to see it. It was decided, that strong spiritual restrictions were to pass by the contemporary bishops called Abba Michael and Abba Gabriel and also Abba *Yohannes Episcopos*, so that no king could take it (the Cross) from Gishen to other Place (Book of *Tefut*).

With regard to the actual size of the True Cross there is no agreement between historians and among church scholars. *Mergeta Yemane-Berhan* and *Memre Simea-Tsediq* claimed that the main body part of True Cross is buried in *Igziabher-Ab* church (interview, 01-2013). Their argument is based on the statement written in the book of history (*Tefut*) as “*anbir meskeliye be dibe mesqel* (put the Cross on the cross shaped mountain or place)”. They said that this statement tells us that the True Cross is whole. In addition to this they said that the story written by many authors saying “the True Cross is divided into four parts which was then distributed to four countries, namely Italy, Greece, France and Egypt (now in Ethiopia)” doesn't mean that the main body part is divided. The three churches did not take not the main beam of the True Cross. For example, Rome may have taken only the upper part of the cross.

However, many Ethiopians even historians believe that the True Cross is *Gemad* (parcel) (Tadesse Tamirat, 1972). Even Synod of EOTC has yet not recognized that the True Cross is whole (interview, 03-2013). The Archbishop of SWD is still saying that *Gemade Meskelu* (parcel of the True Cross) (Atsede Wudneh, 2013, May).

**Table 1: Opinion of religious tourists on History of Gishen Mariam**

History of the site	Count	Percent
Less Attractive	3	1.7
Attractive	157	88.7
Have no idea	17	9.6
Total	177	100.0

Source: Survey, 2013

From the religious tourist opinion as shown in table 1, 90.4% of religious tourists rated the history of Gishen Mariam as an attractive aspect. From a qualitative perspective, the history of Gishen Debre Kerbe Mariam is very attractive. This is the main motivating factors for many religious tourists. Gishen Debre Kerbe Mariam is a very important place for individuals who are motivated by either spiritual or secular history.

### **Holy Water (TSEBEL)**

Holy water shown in figure 8 below was brought from the river Jordan in Palestine via caravans of camels in 15<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, this holy water has been casting evils from people, healing them physical disease. Each year many pilgrims fetch and take holy water home with them to bless their abodes. Holy water is also considered to be a souvenir that many pilgrims are expected to bring back to their homes.



**Figure 8: Holy water (photo by Author, 2013)**

Nevertheless, it has been only accessible three times per year for religious tourists. The tourism experience has been provided in very disorganized ways with an absence of rooms and appointed priests to provide the service. In order to make this resource

an important religious tourism product, it should be at least accessible at any time of the year and the service should be offered in organized ways by appointed ordained priests.

**Table 2: Opinion of religious tourist over holy water**

<i>Holy water</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Less attractive	4	2.0
Attractive	139	79.0
Have no idea	34	19.0
Total	177	100.0

Source: Survey, 2013

This resource has a potential to attract people who wanted spiritual treatment of their disease. Table 2 shown above revealed that vast majority of religious tourist said holy water is attractive (79%). In tourism word Gishen has potential for health tourism.

**Monasticism**

Monasticism was first started in Egypt then it expanded throughout the world. In Ethiopia it was started by the Nine Saints in the fifth century (Tadesse Tamirat, 1972). Even though it has different meaning and culture in different countries and religions, monasticism in Ethiopia is a life whereby individuals live for the sake of spiritual reward by ignoring secular temporary life either alone or in group in wilderness areas and monasteries. As written in *Fetha Negest* (justice of king) “monastic life is wisdom of Christian law and monks are earthly angels or heavenly people, followers of Jesus Christ as much as it is humanly possible...” (Chapter 10:1). Their daily job is

serving God and praying. They eat one meal per day. The food they eat is called *Nifro and Dabe*. They fast every day except Saturday and Sunday including holy days.

Those individuals who became monks are classified into two: celibates and non-celibate (married/widow and single). Those who are celibates and educated in church tradition can become archbishops while the latter couldn't. In general monasticism is a way of life for the sake of blessing and saving soul, and it is very unique way of life whereby EOTC religious followers give prestige.

During the time this study was conducted, 500 monks and nuns were reported as they were living in the church. However, their life was not like in other monasteries of Ethiopia whereby they live committing spiritual activities alone. Because, Gishen is parish church not monastery; both married people and monks who dedicated their life to Jesus Christ live. According to the study conducted in 2008, fifty monks were

forcefully evicted from the church by the administration of the church in the year 2000 E.C. The saddest news was that many of the monks had no house, no means of income, no land (interview, 01-2013). Out of the 152 direct safety-net program (DSNP) beneficiaries in Gishen kebele, many of them were monks (interview, 01-2013).

Though there was no well-organized monastic life in the church, religious tourists rated life of monks as it is attractive (50%), less attractive (10%) and not attractive (6%). Those who exactly know that there was no monastic life in Gishen were 34 percents of the respondents. It can be suggested that those who rated monasticism as attractive perhaps didn't know about the absence of monastic life in Gishen; because if they had known, they wouldn't have rated the monastic life in the church as attractive. Besides, they shouldn't have known that Gishen Mariam is a parish church not a monastery whereby only monks and nuns live.

Whatever happens today, there is a prospect that Gishen Mariam will become monastery in the near future and thus people will go for getting monastic experience or service. Monastic life is the reason for many people traveling to religious sites in Greece for example (Dora, 2012). It also could enable Gishen Mariam be visited at any time of the year.

### **Natural Cave of Saint Gabriel the Archangel**

According to church teachings, the Natural cave of the Archangel Saint Gabriel was discovered by a monk by the name of *Giorgis Zemenber* in 682 AD during the reign of *Bahire-Ekla*. The Natural cave with its religious resources is situated on the western downward slope of Mount Gishen Mariam. To reach the natural cave from mount Gishen Mariam and return, it takes

about four and half hours on average. There are two churches situated some meters apart: the first church that can be seen from Gishen is the Saint George Church (the first picture in figure 9) and the second church is found within the cave called *Bisrate Gabriel Church* (the second picture in figure 9). Inside the cave there are four holy waters which are important for EOTC religion followers. These holy waters (*Tsebel*) are name Saint *Arsema*, Saint George, Archangel Saint Gabriel and John the Baptist. During the study on January, 2013, *Tsebel* of John the Baptist was dried hence not accessible. *Mergeta Yemane-Birhan* in his book stated "all the four *Tsebel* have healing power" in providing evidence to this statement he stated:

*1) Women who entered to the cave to fetch water being in period were chased out by a big serpent that came from inside the cave. As a result of this, women of the village usually entered to the cave once after they have got cleaned from the period. 2) At least twelve evils were casted from a girl who came from Merhabetie by tsebel of John the Baptist. 3), Tsebel of Saint George has supported villagers in their success and has freed some of the drug users/abuser. 4), as the Tsebel of Saint Arsema in different regions of the country have been doing miracles the Tsebel of Arsema found in the cave healed a woman from HIV AIDS (Yemane-Birhan, n.d).*

These days, people are eager to be healed from their disease by any means. In this regard, these four holy waters could be preferred by these individuals. Therefore, from tourism point of view these *Tsebels* (holy waters) could provide an opportunity for traditional health tourists as there is travel to *Tsadqane Mariam* (a famous monastery in Ethiopia).



**Figure 9: Saint George church and church of Archangel Saint Gabriel**

Besides the four holy waters, the natural cave comprises full skeletons of monks who died in different periods. Though it was not accessible during the study there is a plan to make it accessible for visitors (interview, 01-2013). This natural cave has a potential to be one of the prime geo-tourism sites in Ethiopia, if made accessible to foreign visitors. But there are numerous hindrances to the development of geo-tourism in the area: the abstinence from entering the cave by passing the *Tsebels* (holy waters). As

*Mergeta Yemane-Birhan* stated in his book, nobody is allowed to pass *Tsebels* (holy water) unless God permitted him” (*Yemane-Birhan, n.d*). The strength of the church servants is that they preserved the natural cave very well observing written regulations posted on visible sides (observation, 01-2013). Everybody was made part of the implementation of the regulations. However, a more scientific investigation on the cave is needed.

**Table 3: Opinion of religious tourists on natural cave**

Natural cave and Church	count	Percent
Less attractive	1	1.0
Attractive	115	65.0
Not answered	60	34.0
<b>Total</b>	177	100.0

Source: Survey, 2013

From the pilgrims point of view it is attractive and has been visited by religious tourist each year on *Meskerem* (September and October) and *Tir* (January). The survey analysis on table 3 above showed that the natural cave of Saint Gabriel the Archangel was rated as attractive by the majority of religious tourists (65%).

In general, it can be said that natural cave of Archangel Saint Gabriel is attractive and could be one potential resource that should be well developed in the future.

### **Movable Tangible Heritages**

Heritages can be tangible and intangible which have different benefits. They can be also movable and immovable. In this regard

EOTC is rich enough. These heritages are found specifically in Gishen Mariam in partially well preserved manner through church tradition. Under this topic the researcher focuses on the movable tangible cultural heritages because other heritages are already discussed in the above topics.

There are about 157 movable tangible heritages which are registered by AWCT Office. These relics have been collected since one thousand and five hundred years of age from emperors and empresses, church fathers, royals and famous persons through gift. *Metshafe Tefut* (book of *Tefut*) is one of the famous books never found elsewhere in Ethiopia except in Gishen Mariam. Many Thrones, Chronicles, Skirts, hand crosses made from silver and gold, gold made cups, and a drum made from silver, different types of icons, dishes made from minerals and other gifts of famous persons, kings, royal families, church fathers etc. were some of the movable heritages kept in store. According to AWCT office, some of heritages were already damaged due to lack of heritage preservation knowledge and skill (interview,

01-2013). So far these heritages are not accessed to public or visitors. These resources have scientific, economic, social and educational values in addition to religious and historical importance (Throsby, 2000; Heritage Lottery Fund, 2011). Thus if they are displayed and accessed to visitors they are expected to draw tourist flow at any time of the year hence solve seasonality problem of Gishen Mariam, and will generate income to the church, and they will be studied by researchers.

### Small Size Semi Monolithic

This semi rock hewn which was carved by king Lalibela before building the 11 churches in the 11<sup>th</sup> century is located on the way to church of the Archangel Saint Michael. It used to be a prayer site/house and shelter for some monks. As a result human skulls and bones were commonly found (figure 10). If well preserved and developed, this resource has a potential to be one of the religious tourism attractions in Gishen Mariam. Based on personal observation people were taking the holy soil */Emnet/* each year as a symbol of their total belief.



Figure 10: Semi rock hewn (photo by Author, 2013)



Compared to other resources few pilgrims rated this resource as “attractive” (56.5%), perhaps due to the unattractive presence of human waste products around the semi

rock hewn and the fact that there is no longer use made of the semi rock hewn by monks and the church.

**Table 4: Opinion of religious tourists on semi rock hewn**

Semi rock hewn	Count	Percent
Not attractive	5	2.8
Less attractive	22	12.4
Attractive	100	56.5
None	50	28.2
Total	177	100.0

Source: Survey, 2013

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The majority of the respondents constituting 90% of the total, were religiously motivated. All participants in the research were Ethiopians. This suggests two things; one, religious tourism is a major activity for domestic tourism in Ethiopia. Two, it is one area in which the country could get to benefit from international tourists. The researcher observed no foreign visitors during the annual festivals.

Religious tourism resources such as holy waters, church buildings, the natural cave, the festivals, the rich church history and movable heritage are some of the resources that have potential to attract religious tourists to Ethiopia. Except for the museum which is being constructed all resources were utilized by the majority of the respondents at least once per year. According to some respondents and the

literature reviewed, Gishen has the True Cross despite difference existing as to the actual size of the True Cross amongst scholars.

Gishen has a huge potential to become a World Heritage site, apart from the religious heritage, the landscape features of the mountain are very unique which gives it an amazing cultural, historical and aesthetic value. Hence in registering this very beautiful historical site with its resplendent religious treasures, the Coptic church and Ethiopian government should work together to create a unique tourism offering.

Further study on the challenges and prospects of religious tourism in Ethiopia are urgently required in order to develop religious tourism sustainably in the area. In addition to this, further study on the actual size of the True Cross should be under taken for the sake of pilgrim satisfaction.

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