



Challenges and opportunities of managing festival tourism for sustainable tourism development: The case of the Ashendye Festival, North Wollo, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Ashendye festival is one of the most famous festivals, which is celebrated in the northern parts of Ethiopia and specifically in Lalibela and its surrounding areas. Since Ashendye's intangible cultural heritage is the ancient festivals of the destination and can provide a lot of value for the local communities, government, and tourism industries, the study is considered to be worthwhile. The objectives of this study were to investigate the challenges and opportunities of Ashendye festival for sustainable tourism development. The target populations were the religious fathers, tourism and culture experts, local guides, tourist information center, souvenirs shops and local community of the destination. A descriptive research design was employed. Non probability sampling was employed to obtain the right respondents. Thus, 25 respondents were chosen through purposely sampling techniques. Findings showed that the many challenges of globalization and commodification, issues of poor funding, issues of infrastructures, lack of commitment for conserving heritage materials, and a lack of awareness were the current management issues plaguing the festival. The opportunities deriving from it were job opportunities, environmental conservation aspects, for ancient festivals, religious values, the further wide spreading of tourism and related occupations all leading to sustainability. These findings showed that the all responsible bodies need to be involved and integrated to solve the management issues and to give attention for the values that the festival is endowed with for cultural tourism development and its sustainability.

Key words: Ashendye festival, intangible cultural heritage, challenges, Lalibela

Background of the Study

Festival tourism is one of the components of cultural tourism which is among the fastest growing globally and enjoying cultural tourism as a high popularity tourism branch. Tourists as participants can share the specific cultural perceptions arising from history and tradition, cuisine and beverages, music and dancing. It provides huge importance in aggravating existential attitudes and unique and unforgettable experiences (Getz, 2008; Huang et al., 2010; Boo and Busser, 2006). Cultural Heritage is an appearance of the ways of living advanced by a community and passed on from one generation to another generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions and values. Cultural Heritage is often expressed as either Intangible or Tangible Cultural Heritage (ICOMOS, 2002).

Intangible cultural heritage is a wide-ranging living heritage, which endures a never-ending process of diffusion. It is passed down from one generation to another, and has been modified and evolving in order to adapt with the environment. The continuous transmission process develops a link between the past, present and future (ICHC, 2003; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). Intangible Cultural Heritage" means any Cultural Heritage that cannot be felt by hands or ears, and includes different



kinds of performances and shows, folklore, religious beliefs, wedding and mourning ceremonies, music, drama, literature and similar other cultural values, traditions and customs of nations, nationalities and peoples (RCCH, 2000). Intangible cultural heritage can be reproduced at any place on the planet as long as there is a connection with the area of the tradition (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; Smith and Akagawa, 2009).

Another major issue is that the administration of cultural heritage is usually in the hands of many different actors, and the more intangible factors of the relationship between tourism and culture are usually not taken into account in forecasting. Locals often lack the skills to manage regional integration. Coordinated management of tourism requires introducing governance systems that involve local government, the tourism stakeholders, local tourism enterprises and the local communities (Mengistu, 2008; OECD, 2009). Another basic issue in cultural heritage and tourism is the technique of restructuring the past in the present through interpretation (Nuryanti, 1996). Interpretation does not only explain historic facts, but generates understanding, increases appreciation, knowledge and pleasure (Herbert, 1989). Another major issue for the cultural heritage industry is funding (Petronela, 2016; OECD, 2009).

In Ethiopia, Amhara region is one of the homes of many cultural heritages. Lalibela is one of the most famous attraction sites of the region. Ashendye is one of the great festivals which are unique intangible cultural heritages in and surroundings of Lalibela. This great event takes place in August to mark the ending of the two weeks fasting period called '*Filseta*'. The name '*Filseta*' is given to remember the supposition of the Virgin Mary or the rising of St. Mary's Corpse (Lalibela town culture and tourism office, 2019). Ashendye festival also represents many intangible aspects and activities of our everyday lives, including the stories, the holidays, the family events, our community gatherings, the languages, the songs, creating and performing, knowledge of natural spaces, beliefs and practices and special community occasions (Amhara Regional State Culture and Tourism Office, 2018).

The world is altering so rapidly that much of our cultural heritages are at risk of being lost, either through physical destruction or loss of knowledge (Bob and Hillary, 2002). In Ethiopia, Lalibela and its surrounding is gifted with great potential of cultural elements. There are many festivals and events in Lalibela such as the Ethiopian New Year (September 11), The finding of the true cross (*Meskel*)(September 27), Asheten Mariam(October 1), Yimrhanne Kirstos (October 29), Nakutelab (November 12), Ethiopian Christ mass (*Genna*)(January 7), Ethiopian Epiphany (*Timket*) (January 19), *Sebaratmo* Giworgis (special day for St. George)(January 26), Kusquam (*tsgie*) (October 3 up to November 15), Ethiopian Good Friday (*Siklet*) (April 6), Ethiopian Easter (*Fasika*)(April 8), *Bilbala* Giworgis (special day of St. Gorge)(April 30), *Lideta* (birth day of St. Merry)(May 9), *Afroaygeba* (May 29), *Kidus* Mikael (St. Michael)(June 20), and last but not least the Ashendye Festival (August 21 -25) (Lalibela Town Culture and Tourism Office, 2019). However, most of those remarkable and huge cultural elements are not in a good condition due to administrative problems (Mengistu, 2008). Considering this critical issue, the researcher sought to achieve two major objectives which are the challenges and opportunities of the Ashendye festival for sustainable tourism development.

Methods and Materials

Description of the Study Area

The Ashendye festival is celebrated in Lalibela and its surrounding areas. Lalibela (Amharic: ላሊበኤ) is located in the North Wollo Zone of the Amhara Region, Ethiopia at around 2,500 meters (8,200 ft) above sea level. The town of Lalibela in Ethiopia is home to one of the world's most astonishing holy sites. All the eleven rock-hewn churches were carved totally out of a solo block of granite with



its roof at ground level. The Rock-Hewn Churches were stated as World Heritage sites in 1978. The whole of Lalibela is large remains of the medieval and post-medieval civilization of Ethiopia (Lalibela Town Culture and Tourism Office, 2019).

Study Design

In this study, a descriptive research design was employed because it helps to describe or identify what is, and interprets the existing conditions, process, documents, opinions etc. A descriptive method was also used to observe, describe and document the current condition of cultural tourism for sustainable tourism development at Lalibela. According to Burns and Grove (2003:201), descriptive research “is designed to provide a picture of situation as it naturally happens”. The study was therefore conducted through a mixed research approach using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Creswell (2014) explained that mixed approaches are a research approach involving collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, integrating the two forms of data and using distinct designs that may involve philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks.

Target Population, Sampling Design and Sample Size

This study has mainly focused on the following bodies. Household leaders of the Lalibela town, Lalibela woreda culture and tourism office experts, Lalibela town tour guides association, tourist information centre, souvenir shops, and religious peoples were the major targeted population of this study. Data was collected through both primary and secondary sources. The researcher used both questionnaires and interviews as a means for collecting primary data. To conduct the study, a non-probability sampling technique was employed. A total of 25 informants were selected through non-probability sampling techniques with purposive selection based on their experience, knowledge, exposure to the industry and their professions.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from both primary and secondary sources were systematically verified, described, analyzed and interpreted accordingly. Qualitative data was conducted through content analysis.

Results and discussion on challenges facing the Ashendye Festival

Globalization and Commodification

As per the respondent’s responses, the challenges of globalization pose a great threat on the festival for cultural tourism development. Globalization is the concept of leading the world as one system, like one culture, one religion, one rule, and even government. In the case of such movements, most of the indigenes will be ignored. To compete with the world’s developed nations, a nation is obliged to accept most of the political, economic ideologies that they espouse. So as westernization comes around, the traditional norms, like culture, music will be dismissed. As a result of globalization, co-modifications of intangible cultural heritage in the communities are becoming the new pressing issues (George, 2010). One of the local communities answered in the following manner regarding the issues of globalization and commodification for the festival for cultural tourism development:

Lalibela is one of the top tourist destinations in Ethiopia. Ashendye festival is one of the tourism products which make Lalibela and its surrounding area a unique tourism potential area. Throughout the year, you can see many foreign tourists who are staying



at the destination to visit sites. During this time, the culture of the society is slowly changing. Some of the local youths are changing their domestic and indigenous culture through the more developed nation's ways of life. But, we have to appreciate and promote our culture and try to share it with the foreign tourists.

Poor Funding

Historic Sites and Monuments in Ethiopia, such as Lallibella, that are crucial to the country's heritage are under threat because of a severe lack of funds to preserve and maintain them. Funding issues take the highest share of the problem compared to other issues at the Ashendye festival for cultural tourism development. It is the most basic issue to solve for safeguarding, promoting and conserving the festival for cultural tourism development sustainability. Most of the respondents agreed that there is a critical lack of sufficient budget to celebrate the festival as it needs be. Without adequate finance, the festival cannot be effectively celebrated well at all. To celebrate the Ashendye festival, it requires the integration of many bodies, and a linking of all the sectors, having sufficient financial power is thus an unquestionable need. From the previous literature review on of heritage interpretation services, it can be determined that both personal and non-personal interpretation services may be integrated in an effort to enhance visitor experience (Ward and Wilkinson, 2006) but this requires training and funding to be effective.

Infrastructure issues

Lalibela is the place where the impossible has become possible, and the incredible has become credible through its eleven magnificent rock hewn churches. Infrastructure is ironically the least important issue as per the response of the respondents. As it is the top most tourist destination site in world, Lalibela town is actually highly exposed to a lack of infrastructures. The main reason is the lack of rain. As the researcher tried to triangulate through in-depth interviews, the area is becoming degraded due to a lack of roads and recreational areas. The growth of cultural development can be assured only if there is accessibility and other amenities. The government should give attention to alleviate infrastructure issues through planning sustainable projects which have direct impacts on cultural tourism development. The Lalibela festivals scenario offers the same situation that is common in heritage sites within other less developed countries. McGrath (2003) argues, that an absence of needed relationships between stakeholders responsible for tourism and heritage, is unacceptable and results in *inter alia* infrastructural problems.

Lack of Commitment of the Conserving Heritage Materials

Commitment is another basic issue affecting the festival and its cultural tourism development potentials. There are many heritage materials in each household. Most of the local communities are using the ancient heritage materials for daily life purposes. There is a great problem in conserving such ancient heritage products and modernization is trying to substitute such products through the changing of fashions and via the introduction of modern instruments and technologies. Most of the respondents agreed that lack of commitment is one of the serious issues among the local community, the local government and also in the private sector. Heritage must be conserved and respected in its historical context. Thus, it is necessary to identify the likely impact of any change on the cultural worth of a place. It takes commitment to avoid uses of festivals that are likely to water down or obscure cultural worth. Thus, all stakeholders need to be inclined to make additions and modifications which support and do not distort historical appearances of places such as their pristine natural environments. Conservation of heritage festivals in any shape or form is very important because it delivers a sense of identity and continuity in a fast-changing world for future generations to enjoy and also appreciate.



Figure 1: Indigenous cultural heritages materials found at the local house of the communities and used for Ashendye festival Source: Google, 2018

Lack of Awareness and Publicity for the Need of Protection

Lack of awareness is moderately one of the key management issues of the festival for cultural tourism development as per the result of the study. This proved that most of the local communities have awareness regarding the need to safeguard the festival, however it doesn't mean that this is enough. Creating awareness is not an overnight activity, it should be a continuous task through all the local communities, and private and government bodies alike.

Lack of Coordination among Stakeholders

Through there are many private sectors in the tourism industry, there is a great gap on integrating and coordination for the developments of local culture and in promoting festivals. For instance, in the destination where the Ashendye festival is celebrated, Lalibela, there are large hotels, airports, NGO's, private associations and others. Most of the respondents agreed that most of the time, the local and regional government is the first responsible body to promote and run the festival yearly. If all the sectors cooperated in an organized manner, this would serve to safeguard the festival for the next generation and the local culture will easily be further promoted and developed. One of the tourism experts in Lalibela asserted:

There is no strong cooperation between the public and private sectors and the local communities. Government alone always promotes the awareness and activities of the festival. The festival can be developed better than the usual ceremony. There may be lots of cultural festivals in regard with Ashendye. There are lots of heritage aspects in our local areas. Different bodies should be integrated for the sake of the development of cultural tourism in the destination.

Most respondents agreed that as a tourist destination site, Lalibela is not fortunate enough to yet have the integration of tourism stakeholders so as to market its tourism products for cultural tourism development.



Figure 2. The risk of land slide which is the place of attending the festival due to lack of coordination among stakeholder
Source: Author's survey, 2018.

Opportunities of Ashendye Festival for sustainable Tourism Development

Aesthetic Value of the Festival

Aesthetics is derived from Greek word *aesthetes*, meaning sense of perception. It includes different ideas to diverse people and to different cultures. Baumgarten (2002) noted that earlier philosophers described aesthetics as the “theory of beauty” or “the philosophy of taste.” He maintains that aesthetics deals with the principles of beauty and artistic taste (Baumgarten, 2002). The festival even sounds attractive. Tourists can be entertained through watching the activities of the festival. To attend each cultural ceremony held at the destination, it takes more than a week. During this season, there are different cultural activities held around the festival area. It thus captures the attention of both domestic and international tourists.



Figure 3. The beautiful girls and celebration which has aesthetic values Source: Author's own, 2018



The basic thing which makes it attractive is its decorative aspects through traditional and authentic cultural products.

As one of the tour guides in Lalibela stated the aesthetic value of the festival is as follows:

It is really a beautiful event in the Lalibela tourist destination site. The festival is the utmost tourism product in relation with the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela. Looking at girls while expressing their feelings and freedom is very interesting and moreover, they are singing and have attractive clothing styles and move in an orderly manner.

According to Gingwei, culturally, tourism aesthetics intends to follow a 'pleasant state; between man and nature, between man and man and between man and himself (Gingwei, 2013). The Ashendye festival's aesthetic value also provides harmonious relations between man and nature, females with each other, and the society in itself.

The Environmental aspect opportunity

The term "Ashendye" is a name given to a thin long leaf, which the girls wear/tie over their dresses from their waist down in a fashionable pattern. So, to celebrate the Ashendye festival, one of the most basic and important tools is green grass. Green grass is found if there is only a preserved naturally green environment. That means that in order to celebrate the festival in a proper manner, keeping the environment conserved is mandatory, as this is where the needed green leaves emanate from. Environmental enhancement may also be found at festival locations, often generated by societal projects such as restoring historic and ancient buildings, an arbour or tree planting programme, and by creating new infrastructure (O'Sullivan and Jackson, 2002). O'Sullivan and Jackson also revealed that festivals provide environmental values for cultural tourism development, since they provoke reconstructing of valued ancient palaces, and also lead to the establishment of accommodation facilities and other important sites.

The environment offers one of its opportunities for cultural tourism development at Lalibela and the destination also promotes other values of the festival. As per the interview with experts the festival can have a great power in efforts to sustain and indeed conserve the environment.

One of the informants from the tourism expert group stated the following:

The festival is unthinkable without the tall grass named 'Ashendye'. It is the basic tool of celebrating the festival. The name of the festival is derived from the green grass, Ashendye. Thus, keeping the environment so as to conserve the green grass is a necessity.

If there is no naturally green environment this means we are going to lose the basic symbols of the unique and special Ashendye festival.



Figure 4. Leaves from the local environment Source: Author's own, 2018

An ancient festival of the destination

The intangible cultural heritage of festivals represents civilizations that have passed. Much of the Ashendye festival symbolizes a florescence of the region's history, norm, language, traditions and culture of Lalibela and its local regions. Lalibela is on one of the main historic routes of the country. The festival also has a wide historical background. So having a great historical background on one of the historical routes of the country makes the festival have even greater historical value.

The history and cultural activities indicate that Ashendye is celebrated by a group of girls in and around Lalibela since perhaps even centuries ago. It takes place annually lasting for a week on average during 5 days in August (16-21). When the Ashendye festival comes at the end of the summer season, in August, girls prepare for all necessary arrangements both mentally and materially. In this regard, families play a significant role and have a responsibility in identifying and fulfilling the prerequisites for the Ashendye girls. This includes buying new clothes and shoes, arranging hairdressing, using the Ashendye leaves and then tying them with a rope in the latest style and allowing them some free time to enjoy the festival. In the local town and also some regional towns, a festival can rapidly assemble local cultural forces and resources, motivating creative interventions and management activities that can affect regional development (Klaic, 2002) and thereby promote tourism sustainability while enhancing cultural awareness.



Figure 5. The female's cultural music at Ashendye festival Source: Author's own, 2018



Figure 6. Ancient traditional music at Ashendye festival Source: Author's own, 2018

Endowed with Religious aspects

The festival originated from a range of religious aspects. The commencement date of the festival, was August 16 CE, signifies the day when St. Mary ascended to heaven. Besides, the reason why the festival is originally celebrated by unmarried young girls is to show their appreciation to the virgin St. Mary. Participating in the festival is considered to be a special blessing from God. The people of Lalibela are predominantly Orthodox Christians. The place is even referred to as the

second Jerusalem. Finally, on the very first day, the Ashendye girls gather together in a specific place and go to the church of St. Mary or any other (Orthodox) church in their community, praying to thank their Almighty God for keeping them all healthy and alive. After thanking their God via their songs and dances, they go to the community. It indicates that the spiritual tradition is the main sensitive issue at the destination where the festival is celebrated. Intangible cultural heritage such as this festival is an energetic power that provides great spiritual improvement I society in general (Bouchenaki, 2012).



Figure 7. Church clergy provide religious services during the festival Source: Author's own, 2018

Increase the number of tourists and create job opportunities

The festival can generate employment and revenue since it attracts many tourists. The Ashendye festival can provide a lot of economic values for the host communities of Lalibela society and its surroundings, for the tourism suppliers/industries, and also for the government. For instance the triangulated data assured that the festival can provide enhanced economic values through increasing the foreign exchange, local communities can get more money during the festival period by supplying the local tourism and related products to the tourist, selling the local food and beverages like *tej*, *enjera*, honey, *tela*, which have a positive multiplier effect, selling souvenirs, shopping, all add to increases in tax revenues. Intangible cultural heritage like festivals, holds great economic potential (Bouchenaki, 2012). Undoubtedly, festivals and local special events are used as key elements within the economy of local and regional development approaches. Moreover, they have untouched capacity and can make significant contributions to the economic development of the region as they provide opportunities for tourism promotion, commercial outcomes and increased investment opportunities (Getz, 2007).

Wide spread of tourism

Most respondents agreed that currently in Ethiopia, there are many private and government institutions which are providing tourism and related occupations. Due to this reason, there are many scholars, researchers, students and other academicians who are taking the festival to be registered under the World Heritage Sites banner.



One of the informant experts from the Lalibela town Tour Guide Association said the following:

The Ashendye festival is an essential to both public education and scholarly research. Archaeologists, historians, researchers and ethnographers use material culture of the festival to study ancient and traditional cultures regarding the festival. The study of other cultures can also lead to new intellectual achievements. For scholars, the greatest informational value comes in studying cultural property within its original context like Ashendye festival.

Conclusion

The study was focused on investigating the challenges and opportunities of safeguarding Ashendye festival for sustainable tourism development. Findings clearly showed that there are critical challenges which should be examined and solved through the integrations of responsible bodies. Thus, issues of globalization, issues of poor funding, issues of infrastructures, lack of commitment for conserving heritage materials, lack of awareness are the current issues of the festival. Therefore, to ensure the sustainability of festival for cultural tourism development, there should be immediate solutions for these management issues. The other objective of the study was to identify the opportunities of the festival for sustainable tourism development. As per the findings of the study job opportunities, environmental aspects, being ancient festival, religious values, wide spread of tourism and related occupation are the prominent opportunities of the festival which can have basic tools of developing sustainable tourism at the destination areas.

Recommendation

- ✓ The local communities should get priority for conservation and preservations of the heritage products.
- ✓ Ashendye festival is one of the ancient festivals. So the tourism and heritage experts should promote to the world and it should be registered under the world heritage sites
- ✓ The government should give appropriate concern for the developments of the festival and give sufficient budget.
- ✓ The values of festivals should be known throughout the local communities through short term and long term training, workshops, and conferences.
- ✓ The management issues regarding Ashendye festival should be minimized and solved through the integration of the private sector, public sector and local communities.
- ✓ The government should give greater recognition for those who sponsor the festival activities.
- ✓ Media should give attention to the diverse cultural activities of the Ashendye festival since this would promote its important sustainability.

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