



Potentials and Challenges of Religious Tourism Development in Lalibela, Ethiopia

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Abstract

The overall significance of tourism in general and more specifically religious tourism, is obtaining greater recognition from different scholars and organizations globally. Religious tourism is explicitly being considered as one of the development options for remote and isolated religious areas in various nations. However, religious tourism is not clearly studied and identified as a capable development option in Ethiopia. Hence, this paper is designed with the objective of assessing the untapped potential and existing problems of religious tourism development in one of the most spiritual sites of Ethiopia, Lalibela. The findings of the study demonstrated that the site is the most impressive religious tourism destination in Ethiopia with its ample religious heritages like annual religious festivals which are centuries old and its numerous live rock-hewn churches and culture. In addition, to the religious environment of the town and the people are very welcoming. However, problems like poor infrastructure, hassling, begging, heritage trafficking, limited community participation, cultural degradation, and lack of attention to the sector by the government administrations are adverse factors which confront religious tourism development in the study area. Hence, far more productive and corrective measures are required to reduce development obstacles and to enlarge the potential of the area are demanded from all tourism stakeholders.

Keywords: Challenges, Development, Lalibela town, Potentials, Religious Tourism

Introduction

Travel and tourism industry, with a vast amount of economic, socio-cultural and environmental returns, is one of the most important economic sectors of the world. Tourism has in recent times provided over 200 million jobs and it generates the largest amount of foreign exchange and contributes about 10% of the world's GDP (IATA, 2012). It is also the most rapidly growing industry in the world, achieving many consecutive years of continuous growth. In the last ten years, from 2001 to 2011, the number of international travelers has grown by 44% (www.unwto.org). Tourism, mainly international tourist arrivals (ITAs), will continue the growth in the future, for instance, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), by the year 2020 ITAs will likely exceed 1.6 billion.

Religion has been an integral motive for undertaking journeys since antiquity (UNWTO, 1995) and it is usually identified as the oldest form of travel (Jackowski and Smith, 1992, in Olsen and Timothy, 2006). Religious tourism, one of the oldest tourism types (Vijayanand, 2012), has various definitions from different writers. The UNWTO have defined religious tourism as a kind of tourism that reflects itself with socially responsible actions by respecting the sacred and thorough stewardship of sacred sites (2011). This definition connotes that religious tourism is responsible and sustainable. Whereas, Esteve (2009) defined religious tourism as a tourist activity through which the tourists seek spiritual grace, looking for the proximity, immersion or contact with the Sacred aspects of life. Accordingly, it has fundamentally to do with religious beliefs and involves people who mainly want to have a religious experience of one sort or another to affirm their faith. Rinschede (1992) has defined Religious tourism as the type of tourism in which travellers are motivated either partially or solely for religious reasons.



A scholarly definition thus indicates that religious tourism is the movement or travel of peoples to churches, mosques and other religious and sacred places for religious purposes.

Religious tourism today is one of the most important types of tourism all over the world (Ebrahimzadeh, Kazemizad, and Eskandari, 2010). It is estimated that 300 to 330 million tourists visit the world's main religious sites each year (UNWTO, 2011). Many countries in Europe and Asia are highly manipulating the religious tourism sector for their economic and socio-cultural development with 40% and 20% share of the world market respectively. Some of the countries which are generating a huge amount of income, include Spain, Italy, France, India, and China.

Ethiopia is a country where all the ancient religions, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Animism are represented. The country has also a long historical tradition of inter-religious tolerance in which all religions live in peace and love. Lalibela, a town in Ethiopia, is one of the country's leading tourism sites. This town is a religious paradise, especially for Orthodox Christian fellows as it is a unique replica of Jerusalem, with its 11th-century monolithic rock-hewn churches with ecclesiastical elements, warm and colorful yearly religious festivals, and an eye catching geographical location. As a result of these and other potential, the area could be a bigger religious tourism destination and an immense source of income for the local community and the nation at large. Nevertheless, religious tourism remains undeveloped due to a number of challenges which initiated this study. Moreover, this study explored the potentials of the study area for religious tourism development. Finally, religious tourism was identified as a development option in all of the rural, religious and partly inaccessible towns of Ethiopia like Lalibela.

Related Literature

Definition and concept of religious tourism

Travel is the phenomenon dating back to antiquity and the reason for travel was diverse and numerous. Religion and religious related matters were some of the reasons why people of the ancient world traveled. However, tourism with its current basic elements and features is a very recent phenomenon (Wright 2008; Gill and Curiel, 2008). According to UNWTO, Tourism encompasses the activities of individuals traveling to, and staying in, different sites outside their customary environment for less than one consecutive year for different purposes like leisure, business and others which is not linked to the activity of income earnings from the place visited. There are also diverse types of tourism based on different means of classification. Based on the motivation of tourists, we can identify a variety forms of tourism like holiday tourism, cultural tourism, social or group tourism, sports tourism, economic tourism, political tourism, religious tourism, ecotourism and so on (2011).

Though religious tourism seems to be the latest scholarly concept, it is surely not a new occurrence. It is one of the oldest, if not the most ancient form of tourism and the difference between these forms of tourism in comparison to the other forms of tourism rely on the issue of religious motivation that is prime the motive for the travellers displacement (Wright, 2008). In the literature, religious tourism has been stated as being a spiritual tourism, religious heritage tourism, religious-based tourism, pilgrimage tourism, faith tourism, sacred tourism, and so on (Phukan, Rahman, Devdutt, 2012; Petroman., et al., 2011). In fact, pilgrimages and other similar travels are identified with the idea of religious tourism with of course the necessary accompanying explanations (Vukonic, 1998).

Religious tourism has many definitions written by different scholars, researchers, and organizations. For instance, Esteve defined religious tourism as a tourist activity through which the tourists seek spiritual grace, looking for the proximity, immersion or contact with the sacred (2009). Rinschede (1992) defined Religious tourism as the type of tourism in which participants are stimulated either partly or totally for religious reasons. The concept of religious



tourism is also defined as a type of tourism in which the adherents of a religion travel either individually or in groups as pilgrims, missionaries, or for leisure (Petroman., et al., 2011). According to the Wright (2008), religious travel is somehow complex in that it includes travel to a religious destination site (example: a trip to the Holy Land); travel with a spiritual intent (example: Christian conference); leisure travel with a fellowship intent (example: Faith-based cruise). Generally, from the above definitions and others, it can easily be understood that religious tourism is a tourism type or form of travel that is motivated by faith or religious reasons. Accordingly, religious tourism includes all the religions, religious places associated with them, and the emotional and spiritual attachments to these centres and infrastructure facilities for the tourists (Sharpley and Sundaram, 2005).

On the other hand, religious tourists are those who engage in tourism but do so at religious sites (Stark, 2009). As per the researchers, Ebrahimzadeh, Kazemizad, and Eskandari, (2010), religious tourists can be classified into two: pilgrims or travelers and multi-purpose religious tourists. For the first group tourists, their motivation is only the religious affairs that the time and duration of their station does not depend on their acts whereas the second groups take part in religious ceremonies and visit other tourism sites with a main concern given to the pilgrimage. Participants of religious tourism do not look for luxury but arduous journeys to meet the divine goal or simple life (Phukan, Rahman, & Devdutt, 2012). Nicolaidis (2016) states rather effectively that:

The pilgrimage tourist enjoys sightseeing, traveling, visiting diverse places and, may travel by land, air or sea to a desired destination. Once there, they may stay for one or many nights and buy local memorabilia, eat at local restaurants and experience the unique culture and virtually act like every other tourist, except that they are primarily spiritually motivated. This therefore includes tourism that is inspired by spirituality and religiousness and it is generally associated with religious heritage sites. The religious desire to travel is one of the oldest motivations.

Spiritual tourism, pilgrimage tourism, and religious tourism are highly related and mostly used interchangeably (UNWTO, 2011; Norman, 2004; Nicolaidis, 2016; Onions, 1983). Spiritual tourism is that type of tourism motivated fully or partly by spiritual or religious values (UNWTO, 2011; Nicolaidis, 2016). Whereas, pilgrimage tourism is a type of tourism encouraged, either partly or wholly by religious motives closely or loosely connected with holiday making or with journey undertaken for social, cultural or political reasons over short or long distances (Vijayanand, 2012; Raj and Morpeth, 2007; Nicolaidis, 2016; Nicolaidis and Grobler, 2017; Petroman., et. al, 2011). Norman (2004) and also Nicolaidis (2016) have defined Spiritual tourism as the travel of tourists who seek out religious or spiritual settings for the purpose of fulfilling their desire to travel, either in whole or in part, and to have some form of religious or spiritual experience . Moreover, religious tourism is closely connected with holiday and cultural tourism. Participants of pilgrims or religious tourism have a chance to travel to the surrounding areas and absorb the culture of the local community. It also a strong affinity with social and group tourism. Religious tourism has political aspects as well, to an extent (Rinschede, 1992).

Ethiopia and Religions

Mankind, in search of its identity and the reason for its existence, has long sought answers to vexing questions in a serious of examinations of teachings, beliefs, and dogmas that later gave rise to the different religions that characterize different cultures (Phillips and Carillet, 2009). Religion is a very complex concept that it has no simple definition, according to Hinnells, (1984) cited in Raj and Morpeth, (2007), and it is a system of recognizable beliefs and practices that acknowledge the existence of a 'superhuman' power that enables people to overcome the problems of life. According to Sherratt and Hawkins (1972), Religion is highly connected with invisible forces. Harvey (2000) explained religion as a well-structured, organized, and socially endorsed ways of reaching out for what people want most (Rotherham,



2007). On the other hand, belief is that something beyond the known world where there exists a power that converts the difficulties into the right solutions (Norman, 2004).

Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic country that harbors different religious beliefs. The main religions in Ethiopia are Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Paganism. Ethiopia is largely a Christian country and most of the people are Orthodox Tewahedo Christians. Most Ethiopians claim that Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia long before the 4th century, but Christianity was not an officially recognized religion of the state until the reign of King Ezana in 341 AD. According to written evidence, Christianity began in Ethiopia when two Syrian Christians (Frumentius and Aedissius) came to Aksum and started to tell people about Jesus Christ and the Christian faith. Frumentius and Aedissius preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to King Ezana, who ruled Aksumite Kingdom in the early 4th century and successfully converted him to Christianity (www.ethiopianorthodox.org).

In Orthodox Christian religion, churches are often built and named after Saints and Angels. The blessed Virgin Mary is honoured above all the saints. The Tabot which is designed after the Ark of the Covenant is placed in the center of each Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It is this symbolic object rather than the church building which is consecrated and accorded extreme relevance. There are also a number of religious festivals. Some of these include Easter, the Solomonic festival, the Timket or Epiphany which is the most celebrated festival, Gena or Christmas, Kidus Yohannes or the Ethiopian New Year and so on (Phillips and Carillet, 2009).

Even though the Aksumite kingdom had accepted the Messiah, Jesus Christ, during the reign of King Ezana in 341 CE, the Ethiopian Jews also known as Falashas or Beta Israel, didn't accept Christianity and continued to practice their Old Testament (Jewish) faith which they still do today. The Falashas (Beta Israel or Ethiopian Jews) were concentrated in Northwest Ethiopia, mainly, in the northern province of Gonder and west of Tigray province. Most of the Falashas who maintained their Jewish religion immigrated to Israel in the 1980s and 1990s. Even though most of the Falashas were migrated to Israel, there are still some Falashas in Ethiopia (<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/ejhist.html>).

The Islamic religion was introduced to Ethiopia in the 7th century CE when the followers and families of the Prophet Mohammed, sought refuge in Aksum. According to the tradition, Mohammed asked the Aksumite King Aderaz to protect his relatives from persecution in Mecca. The then king of Aksum, commonly known as king Armah, welcomed them, respected their religion and offered them the needed protection. Ethiopian Islam is expressed by two complimentary belief forms: Urban Islam and Rural Islam. The former is mainly professed in cities with Mosques, Koranic Schools and the religious committees follow an orthodox Sunni Islam belief system. The latter is widespread in many areas of Oromia, Southern region, Afar, and Somali regions (<http://www.ethiopian treasures.co.uk/pages/religion.htm>).

Paganism or indigenous religious beliefs are widely practiced in Gambella, Southern Peoples' State, and Oromia administrative regions. Some of these regions in Ethiopia also contain other anonymous considerably animistic communities of practice and faith (www.ethiopian treasures.co.uk/pages/religion.htm).

Challenges of Religious tourism development

The tourism industry plays multiple roles in the economy, socio-culture, and environment of all countries in the world. The most widely recognized outcomes of tourism include providing employment, incomes, taxes revenues and foreign exchange (Nicolaidis, 2016; Suleiman and Mohamed, 2010). Religious tourism as any other type of tourism is volatile in nature that anything can affect it. Changes like global economic downturns, inflation, currency fluctuations, disease or viruses, and political unrest all hamper religious tourism development.



However, despite the numerous negative impacts of globalization, terrorism, racism, economic recession and possible self-imposed limitations on travel due to concerns for climate change, religious tourism is and can be a greater force for peace, solidarity, and integrity of the world (UNWTO, 2011). Some other factors that affect religious tourism include political instability, other political obstacles, financial problems, environment and health factors, marketing, services and poor infrastructural and facilities factors (Nicolaidis, 2016).

Religious tourism development

Religious tourism is one of the oldest types of tourism worldwide. However, the first international conference on religious tourism was conducted in 1967 in Cordoba, Spain, by the World Tourism Organization (WTO), entitled "Tourism and Religions: A Contribution to the Dialogue of Cultures, Religions, and Civilizations", highlighting the sociology of religions in world tourism (UNWTO, 2011). Historical documents and prehistoric signs and evidence from the ancient great civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt indicated that there have been numerous religious trips by many thousands of people from the past up to now. In fact, mankind for thousands of years has taken long journeys in order to observe religious practices. Nonetheless, careful marketing of sites is vital as Nicolaidis and Grobler (2017) state that:

Spirituality is a multi-dimensional construct based on dimensions such as religion, quality of life and wellness, which are all closely related. Consequently, spirituality needs to be carefully marketed and a tourism perspective highlighting segmentation is considered to be a suitable method to adopt.

Today, religious tourism is one of the most important phenomena which has been spread all over the world and has overcome the obstacles of weather (climatic change), terrorism, and infrastructural limitations (Ebrahimzadeh, et al., 2010). According to UNWTO estimations from 300 to 330 million tourists visit the world's key religious sites each year (UNWTO, 2011). Being the ancient home of the world's three major religions: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, Palestine is most probably the first center of religious tourism (Suleiman and Mohamed, 2010). Religious tourism today, according to the UNWTO (2011), is dominated by Europe followed by Asia. Out of an estimated 600 million religious and spiritual voyages, 40% were in Europe and around half in Asia. Sustainable development of religious tourism with education and training given their rightful place are the keys to safeguarding the vast cultural heritage of the world (UNWTO, 2011).

Research Methodology

Description of the Study Area

The town of Lalibela is found in North Wollo Administrative Zone of the Amhara regional state. Administratively, the town of Lalibela was initially governed under the municipality of the Lalibela town administration of Lasta *woreda*. Geographically, Lalibela is situated at 12°02'034"N and 39°02'611"E, at an altitude of 2480m.a.s.l. The town is 701 km far from Addis Ababa. Except for a few parts in the West bordered by Meket *woreda*, Lalibela town administration is entirely bordered by Lasta *woreda*. The northeast of the town of Lalibela is Mount Abune Yoseph, 4190 m.a.s.l., which is one of the dominant features of the northern half of western Ethiopia. The south-east of Lalibela is followed by the headwaters of the Tekeze River. Lalibela is in rugged, hilly, and rolling landforms, with only a small portion of plain areas, forming the topography of the town (Asfawossen et al. 2008). The present topography in and around Lalibela constitutes valleys and gorges and rugged mountains which include flat-topped plateaus and steep-sided volcanic plugs. Lalibela and its surroundings are therefore, characterized by impressive landscape features in which the natural landscapes of the province host many rock-hewn and built in cave churches which are the most important tourist sites of the country.

Research design, Subjects, and Data sources

The nature of the study problems most often dictates the methodology of the study (Creswell, 2003). The research strategy chosen for this study was a descriptive survey so as to identify the potential and challenges of religious tourism. Hence, the study implemented methodological pluralism whereby both qualitative and quantitative research designs were employed in the study in order to augment and enhance it. The key focus participants of this study were selected both randomly and purposefully so as to include all the concerned stakeholders in the exploration process. Hence, local communities living in the Lalibela town, religious leaders, hoteliers, hotel managers, tour guides, LTACTO (Lalibela Town Administration Culture & Tourism Office) experts, domestic and international tourists were the main subjects of the study. This research work was basically dependent on primary and secondary data as main sources of information. To collect the primary and secondary data, different instruments including questionnaires, interviews, non-participatory field observations, documents and audio-visual resources were employed.

Sampling techniques and sample size

For the achievement of the purpose of this study, sample subjects were purposefully selected for interview from different stakeholders in tourism in Lalibela town. The semi-structured in-depth interview was forwarded to a total of forty-eight (48) different subjects. For the questionnaire provided to the local community household level, random sampling was applied based on their proximity to churches and their involvement in tourism activities. So as to figure out the sample size, Gomm's formula ($n = \frac{N}{1 + Na^2}$) where n = the sample size, N = total population, and a = confidence interval (0.05) was used (Gomm, 2008). The sample size was about 390 in total. However, because of time and budget constraints, the sample size of questionnaire survey was left at 130.

Methods of data analysis

Valid quantitative data was obtained from the questionnaire and then coded, entered, processed and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software version 20. The statistical analysis included frequency analysis and descriptive statistics measures. A narration was used to analyze the qualitative data obtained from questionnaires, key informant interviews, observation and review of documents. The results of the study were presented using pictures, diagrams, tables, and also charts.

Result and Discussions

Potentials of religious tourism development

Lalibela town has lots of religious tourism resources which enabled the site to become one of the most important tourist destinations in Ethiopia. Some of the most important ingredients for religious tourism development are discussed below.

Table 1. Religious tourism potentials of Lalibela town

	Variable	Yes (1)		No(2)		Total		Mean	St. Deviation
		N	%	N	%	N	%		
1	The Rock-hewn churches of Lalibela & other churches nearby	114	87.7	16	12.3	130	100.0	1.12	.330
2	Religious materials & inscriptions	81	62.3	49	37.7	130	100.0	1.38	.486
3	Religious festivals	80	61.5	50	38.5	130	100.0	1.38	.488
4	The welcoming people	66	50.8	64	49.2	130	100.0	1.49	.502
5	Image of the site	56	43.1	74	56.9	130	100.0	1.57	.497
6	The infrastructures	26	20.0	104	80.0	130	100.0	1.80	.402
	Group Mean							1.456	

Source: the researchers' own survey

The Rock-hewn churches of Lalibela and other churches nearby

The Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela are the most impressive 11th century monolithic, semi monolithic and cave churches around. According to the data collected from the local residents via the questionnaire (87.7%), the ancient rock made churches are the key attractions for both foreign and domestic visitors to Lalibela town as well as to Ethiopia in general. They also believe that those rock-hewn churches, eleven in number, are the targets of most visits in Ethiopia. These churches are grouped into three facing the river called 'Jordan'. The first group north of Jordan River comprises six churches; Bete Medihane Alem, Bete Maryam, Bete Meskel, Bete Denagil, Bete Debre Sina and Bete Golgota. According to local priests, this group of churches symbolizes the Earthly Jerusalem. The second group of churches symbolizing the Heavenly Jerusalem are located East of the Jordan River and comprise Bete Amanuel, Bete Merkorios, Bete Abba Libanos and Bete Gabriel-Rufael. The third group constitutes only one church, Bete Giyorgis.

The churches of Lalibela are unique in many ways. They were carved with all their architectural elements out of solid rock, without joining any piece of stone together. Their refined architectural and aesthetic expressions seem almost superhuman. They are still places of active and living worship for more than 850 years after they were built. More than many other monument in the world, they constitute a living link with the past. Each one of the churches is different in style and has its own unique features. Four of them are strictly monolithic in structure and have no resemblance to others of their kind in the whole world. They are completely free standing, and attached to the rock only at their bases. These monolithic churches are Bete Medhanealem, Bete Mariam, Bete Amanuel and Bete Giorgis.

Figure 1: Bete Medhane Alem & Bete Giorgis



Source: Photo by the researcher

Besides those churches, there are plenty of rock-hewn cave and cave churches within an only 20-50 Km distance from the town. Each of the churches have religious value and can be considered as the center of religious pilgrimage. The churches are also known for their ample heritages, festivals, and rich histories. Some of these churches around Lalibela include Asetan Maryam, Yimrehane Kiristos, Arbatu Ensessa, Bilbila Chirkos, Bilbila Giyorgis, Na'akuto La'ab, Geneta Maryam, Machina Maryam and others. These facts make the town of Lalibela and its surrounding a very important religious tourism center.

Table 2: Summary of ancient rock-hewn churches in and around Lalibela

No.	Church	Location	No	Churches	Locations
1	Bete Medhane Alem	Lalibela	13	Asheten Mariam	>>
2	Bete Mariam	>>	14	Genete Mariam	>>
3	Bete Amanuel	>>	15	Emekinna Medhane Alem	>>
4	Bete Giorgis	>>	16	Emekina Lideta Mariam	>>

5	Bete Meskel	>>	17	Bilbaba Goirgis	Northwest of Lalibela
6	Bete Danagel	>>	18	Bilbala Kirkos	>>
7	Bete Golgotha	>>	19	Sarzina Mikael	>>
8	Bete Debre Sinai	>>	20	Arbatu Ensessa	>>
9	Bete Gabriel	>>	21	Yimrehane Kirstos	>>
10	Bete Merkorios	>>	22	Kenkenit Mikael	North of Lalibela
11	Bete Abba Libanos	>>	23	Abune Yoseph	Northeast of Lalibela
12	Ne'akuto Le'alab	Southeast of Lalibela	24	Tirkuza KidaneMihret	>>

Source (Mengistu, 2004)

Tangible and Intangible heritages

Besides the rock art, the churches are full of tangible heritage. The heritage is one of the most important potential aspects that attract visitors to the area. 62.3% of the respondents, which are the majority, believe that tangible and intangible heritage in each of the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela offers a big potential for religious tourism development. On the other hand, 37.7% of the total respondents did not consider the heritage of the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela as a potential aspect for further religious tourism development in the area. However, according to Elene, (2010), a wealth of ecclesiastical objects forms an intrinsic part of the churches and the religious practices, ranging from processional crosses, bells, chandeliers of gold and silver, priestly vestment and robes, to church paintings, icons, scrolls, and manuscripts. Many date to the period of the churches themselves, such as King Lalibela's hand cross and prayer stick. Some of these identified and recorded heritage items are listed in table 3 below.

Table 3: List of Registered Lalibela monastery heritages

No.	The rock-hewn churches	Old parchments	Other religious heritages	Total
1	Bet Mariam	76	135	214
2	Bet Medehanialem	86	70	156
3	Bet Golegota	89	89	178
4	Bet Meskel	12	12	24
5	Bet Denagel	5	7	12
6	Bet Gebriel Rufael	45	27	72
7	Bet Amanuel	53	36	89
8	Bet Merkorios	33	24	57
9	Bet Aba libanos	41	24	65
10	Bet Georgis	51	45	96

Source: Lalibela culture and tourism department

Religious festivals

As shown in table 1 above, most respondents (61.5%) accepted religious festivals as crucial religious tourism development prospects. The other 38.5% of the respondents did not understand the potential of religious festivals for better religious tourism development in the study area. This indicates the existence of a huge misconception of the religious festivals and their value in the local community.

Figure. 2: Warm and colourful religious festivals in Lalibela town



Source: The researcher's photo

Festivals and special occasions can be religious, public holidays, commercial or other special days. In Ethiopia, there are many colourful festivals, which are of touristic interest. Some researchers like (Mengistu, 2005) have also declared that Lalibela town is the home of Christian pilgrims. Thousands of pilgrims arrive every year to celebrate Christmas, Epiphany, and Easter from every corner of Ethiopia and across the world. During these holidays Christians and other tourists from different parts of the world flow towards Lalibela to be part of the celebration and to share the spiritual blessings of the area. Furthermore, as per the Saint Lalibela Monastery Administration (SLMA), there are many more religious festivals or holidays in the town which could be an additional means to obtain needed tourist inflows and which could boost religious tourism development, if only they could be properly managed. According to key informants, developing the religious festivals would enable the town to attract a high number of domestic and international tourists which in return would lead to a greater economic return to the town as well as the country's GDP.

Some of these religious holidays include;

- Ethiopian New year, on September 11/12
- *Sibrete Atsm* (Matres of St. Georgis on January 26)
- *Debre Zeit*
- Siklet (Death of Jesus Christ)
- Easter (*Fasika*)
- Christmas (*Ledet*) on Tahsas 29th E.C (7th January)
- Ehipany (*Timket*) on Ter 11th E.C (19th January)
- The Finding of the True Cross (*Meskel*) on Maskaram 17th E.C (27th September)
- *Ginbot Lideta* (The birth of Marry on May 9)
- The death of St. Lalibela (June 20)
- Ashendiye (the rise of St. Marry August 22-26)

Welcoming people

The people of Lalibela are very interesting, sociable and welcoming, and their warm welcome has a big effect on the tourists inflow as stated by key informants. However, as shown in table 1 above, only 50.8% of the total respondents considered a warm welcome in the town as a potential aspect to develop religious tourism further.

A big portion of the respondents 49.2%, did not think that the welcoming people of the area has an effect on the tourist's preferences. According to them, as long as there are rock-hewn churches, there will be high tourist inflows irrespective of a warm welcome from the community. From this, it can be understood that one of the biggest aspect of value of the local

community, 'welcoming guests' was not universally understood to be one of the most important aspects for attracting tourists.

Image of the site

The rock-hewn churches of Lalibela are world heritage sites and some of the most famous religious pilgrimage sites for the Christian people of Ethiopia and others from around the world. This huge image of the site could be one potential driver for religious tourism development in the study area. Based on the survey conducted, 43.1% of the respondents answered 'Yes' for the variable 'is the image of the Lalibela town both nationally and internationally the potential for religious tourism development in the area?' While the majority 56.9% of the respondents answered 'No'. This means the highest section of the respondents did not consider the image of the town as an important input for religious tourism development.

Tourists' excitement

The interviewed international and domestic tourists were asked about their feelings on the rock-hewn churches they visited. All of them were delighted about what they had seen. Some of the expressions of tourists are stated below:

'Excellent - history and age of the sites is incredible'; 'Very impressive - intricate one of the best religious ancient place'; 'Fascinating - still 'yet to be discovered'; 'It is exciting - because that is a site inactivity and it is a very concentrated area in a small place.'; 'It is the very beautiful place to see, very good experience,'; 'It is the second most beautiful religious site of the world only next to Jerusalem.'; 'Magnificent site'; 'The finest for Africa'; 'Architecturally different in Africa'. (Various respondents)

The story of Lalibela as a 'second Jerusalem'

Legend states that perhaps king Lalibela was making a deliberate attempt to create a new Jerusalem on African soil, accessible to all Ethiopians, that the Orthodox Christians saved from traveling a long distance to Jerusalem. In the town of Lalibela, and in each church, everything has biblical implications. What is found in Lalibela is symbolically found there as it is essentially in the holy city, Jerusalem. This is why the town is called a 'Second Jerusalem'. Furthermore, some of the churches of Lalibela have symbolic representations which show the similarities between the Jerusalem of Palestine and Lalibela of Ethiopia. For instance, Bete Mariam represents Gethsemane; Bete Medhane Alem represents the tent of the Ark of the Covenant; Bete Golgotha - The Holy Sculpture; Bete Giorgis - the Ark of Noah; Bete Gabriel - The Road of Heaven; Bete Libanos - Cherubim supports the Throne of God; Bete Amanuel - Heavenly Jerusalem. Most of the key informants think that the story of Lalibela as the second Jerusalem and the Christian community belief about the story, have attracted ample visitors to the area. Therefore, Lalibela town as a second Jerusalem could be one big opportunity to promote the town and the country to attract more needed tourists.

Challenges of religious tourism development

Problems of religious tourism development in Lalibela town include the robbery of heritage items, a lack of infrastructure, illicit trafficking, and other issues mentioned in table 4 below.

Table 4: The challenges that are affecting religious tourism development in Lalibela

	Variables	Yes		No		Total		Mean	Standard deviation
		N	%	N	%	N	%		
1	Lack of infrastructure	76	58.5	54	41.5	130	100	1.42	.495
2	Lack of Local community involvement	69	53.1	61	46.9	130	100	1.47	.501
3	Rich people domination	68	52.3	62	47.7	130	100	1.48	.501
4	Bars and Night clubs	62	47.7	68	52.3	130	100	1.52	.501



5	Poor waste disposition and management	54	41.5	76	58.5	130	100	1.58	.495
6	Heritage trafficking	48	36.9	82	63.1	130	100	1.63	.484
7	Lack of Attention from the Administration	46	35.4	84	64.6	130	100	1.65	.480
8	Elicit trafficking	38	29.2	92	70.8	130	100	1.71	.457
9	Lack of city planning	37	28.5	93	71.5	130	100	1.72	.453
10	Poor Religious festivals management	27	20.8	103	79.2	130	100	1.79	.407
	Group Mean							1.6	

Source: The researcher's own survey

Lack of infrastructure

As displayed in the table above, limited infrastructures are mentioned as a challenge to religious tourism development. Accordingly, the majority of the respondents 58.5% stated lack of infrastructure as being a major challenge for religious tourism development in the study area.

Lack of local community involvement

Another challenge of religious tourism development in the town identified was a lack of local community participation. Accordingly, 53.1% of the respondents which is the majority, considered limited local community participation as a challenge for further religious tourism development. On the other hand, a big proportion of the respondents 46.9% did not accept limited local community involvement in the tourism business as a problem that delayed the better development of religious tourism in Lalibela town. However, according to key informants, if any tourism development has to be productive, the local community should be fully involved in the planning, implementation and decision-making processes. This concurs with Nicolaides (2016) in an article relating to Marian tourism in Spain.

Rich people domination

As shown in table 4 above, the majority of the respondents 52.3%, believed that the domination of a few rich people in the town's tourism industry has hampered the further development of religious tourism. The remaining large proportion of the respondents 47.7% were against the idea of the 'monopolization of tourism sectors by few rich and influential people only affects religious tourism development'. However, most key informants noted that despite other businesses, tourism demands the mass involvement of the local community if it has to be developed in a sustainable manner.

Expansion of nonreligious businesses/ activities

The other threats of religious tourism development in the town as agreed by the high amount of local community respondents (48%) and indicated by key informants, was non-religious activities and businesses like bars, prostitution and other nightlife activities. According to the key informants and researcher's own personal observations, activities against the religious doctrine of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC) like prostitution, visiting bars, and other immoral nightlife were increasing 'dangerously' over time.

Due to the fact that most of the nightlife couldn't reflect the pure culture of the community, a large number of the young community members were losing their identity and becoming careless on aspects of their own precious heritage. This could further lead to theft and robbery of heritage or the destruction of heritage. Thus, the aforementioned and other anti-religious and anti-dogmatic activities and businesses were viewed as major challenges of religious tourism development in the 'holy land' of Lalibela.

Lack of waste management

Out of the total respondents, 41.5% accepted that poor waste disposal and management in Lalibela town is a big challenge for religious tourism development. Whereas the majority of 58.5% of the respondents think that the town is tidy and feel there is no problem related to sanitation of the town. However, during personal observations, there were lots of dirty, smelly and disgusting areas in the town. Moreover, most of these areas were near the most precious heritage sites of the town, and in the countryside. Poor waste management was an issue raised by some interviewed tourists and was viewed as a big problem that should be alleviated. The lack of public toilets, and the nonexistence of solid waste depositing boxes, and the lack of participation by all stakeholders in the cleaning and maintaining the hygiene of the town were some of the major problems observed relating to waste management problems in the town.

Robbery of heritage items

As shown in table 4 above, 36.9% of the total respondents agreed that heritage trafficking by both residents and tourists was one of the major challenges of religious tourism development in Lalibela town. Whereas the largest part of the respondents 63.1% believed that heritage trafficking or theft and robbery were not problems influencing religious tourism development in the study area. According to the Lalibela town Police Office, heritage theft and robbery were lessened since 1997. Credit for this goes to the local community for being cooperative and helpful in safeguarding the heritage items such as important artefacts.

Lack of Attention from the Administration

As per the survey conducted and displayed in table 4 above, a lack of attention from the government for religious tourism was considered as a challenge for only 35.4% of the total respondents. Though most of the respondents did not consider the lack of attention from the administration as a problem, according to key informants, as a major economic sector, tourism in general and religious tourism, in particular, should receive priority. According to them the lack of the administrative attention to religious tourism development has adversely affected the development of the sector, the town, as well as the country at large.

Illicit trafficking

Illicit trafficking in the holy land was another major challenge for religious tourism development in Lalibela town according to most key informants. However, only 29.2% of the total local community respondents considered it as a problem for religious tourism development. As shown in the table 4 above, most of the respondents (70.8%) did not agree that illicit trafficking is a big threat to religious tourism development. Hence, the integration of religious tourism with the local community living patterns, values, and activities should be discussed with the residents so as to be successful.

Lack of planning

Based on the data displayed in table 4, 28.5% of the respondents, think that lack of a Lalibela town plan and map, has affected religious tourism development. While the larger proportion of the respondents 71.5% did not relate the absence of town planning with religious tourism development. As per the information obtained via interviews with the town administration municipality office, the town has a master plan but the master plan itself was not complete and problematic for various reasons. Besides, the town had no LDP (Local Development Plan). This could clearly affect the development projects taking place in the town and the overall control system. Furthermore, the absence of a town plan may negatively influence the heritage issues which are the very core of religious tourism development.

Lack of religious festival management

As shown in table 4 above, only 20.8% of the respondents confirmed the inability to manage religious festivals as a challenge for religious tourism development. At the same time, the majority of the respondents did not recognize mismanagement of religious festivals or other problems related to religious festivals as a problem that affects religious tourism development. Though festivals have multidimensional benefits in terms of creating cross-cultural understanding, unless properly managed no doubt they would have huge costs going forward. The costs would be greater if the festival was religiously based because of the fragile nature of the sector. Therefore, as said by most key informants, besides developing religious festivals proper management should be in place.

Seasonality

The tourism industry is seasonal in its very nature where there may be high tourist flows in one period and the opposite at other times. This seasonal nature of the industry which has both off or low and peak or the high season could be considered as both an opportunity and a challenge. However, seasonality in Lalibela as well as in Ethiopia is only a challenge as the country and the town was not welcoming tourists at its full capacity. As per the key informants, one of the challenges of religious tourism development in Lalibela town was seasonality which concurs with Nicolaides (2016). According to key informants, the flow of tourists was limited to the major festivals of the year. That means during the remaining vast portion of the year the town was relatively quiet as the town is highly tourist dependent.

Hassling and Begging

Hassling means annoy tourists continually or chronically. According to most interviewed tourists, tourism experts, and local respondents, hassling was one of the most chronic challenges of religious tourism development in the study area. Most youth of the area try hard to get help from the tourists by asking for sponsorship for travel or education in Ethiopia or abroad, and although most are not genuine, some stories are sadly true. Some pleas are merely scams and 'rip-offs'. Though hassling is common in a historic way, the issue is critical and at its climax in Lalibela town. Though respondents of this research considered scamming and rip-offs as normal, all interviewed tourists agreed that hassling should be avoided. On the other hand, Lalibela town security and the police administration were trying their best to control hassling although success seems to be a far-off wish. The begging tourists' encounter in the case of Lalibela is one of the most distrusting aspects of travel in poorer countries as asserted by Phillips and Carillet (2009) and also Nicolaides (2016). The church administration has organized a compound to settle and help old and helpless people. Though the project is highly reduced the problem of begging remains one of the most common problems of tourism development in Lalibela town.

Other challenges

Besides those challenges mentioned above, key informants identified the following additional challenges of religious tourism development in Lalibela town. These include corruption, lack of a clear buffer and core zone delimitation and management, buffer zone construction, degradation of religious values, the poor treatment of tourists, overcharging, the landscape, acculturation, and lack of tourism help desks.

Religious tourism for sustainable development

Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be



fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems (UNWTO, 2009).

Most key informants strongly believe that religious tourism if it is community-based and controlled properly, can be a highly effective means of local community empowerment, religious heritage conservation and sustainable development of the study area. According to experts, religious tourism is an inevitable development approach in a destination area like Lalibela. Religion or spirituality is just more than a way of life in the community of Lalibela. Although the theme is very sensitive, if it is handled very carefully, it will be very easy to mobilize the community for the betterment of their life and the sustainability of the area. As per most experts' views, religious tourism in Lalibela has returned and it creates a sense of belonging to the preservation of the cultural and historical heritages; injects foreign currency into the economy; assures the conservation and preservation of religious properties and heritages; generates income for heritage conservation; enables sharing of culture and tradition with peoples from different parts of the world; enhances knowledge and creativity of people; helps the locals to maintain the religious values and heritages; provides jobs for people who to engage in the sector; and so on.

At the same time if it is not properly managed and controlled, it may have some shortcomings because religious tourism is sensitive in its nature, it could be easily biased by some group who have hidden personal agendas. Moreover, the people may remain dependent on other potential issues if they are not allowed to participate using their skills and abilities. At the same time, only a few people may benefit out of the process at the expense of many (the poor). Moreover, if it is not properly controlled, it may damage religious heritage, the religious environment and break down the spiritual values of the church and people. Therefore, it was agreed that since the main tourist attraction of the destination is highly linked with religious elements, community-based religious tourism is an effective means of religious heritage conservation and sustainable development. Moreover, there should be proper plans, management, and activity frameworks crafted by the cooperative effort of the local community, administrations, tourism business sectors and other shareholders, failing which, the costs could be highly destructive.

Implications based on discussed research results

According to the findings of the research, if religious tourism has to be better developed in Lalibela town, all the problems and challenges mentioned above and other potential treats should be properly addressed by the efforts of the community, the government, the Orthodox Church and nongovernmental development agents. Nicolaidis (2016) asserts that a well-planned strategic long-term approach involving all stakeholders is needed together with a coordinated management of all the relevant components which make a destination appealing. Thus it is imperative that local services and infrastructural development support the idea of sustaining religious pilgrimage tourism.

Some of the solutions include expanding infrastructural development, keeping the town clean, tidy and attractive; high and continuous control of illicit trafficking; continuous advertisement and promotion; proper attention to heritage conservation and protection; high quality guest treatment with no begging and hassling; creating a sense of ownership; developing and managing religious festivals; increasing the community's participation in tourism-related planning, decision-making and implementation of tourism ventures; controlling cultural degradation via training and awareness creation.

Conclusion



Ethiopia has a unique tourism product few other countries of Africa enjoy, since in Ethiopia, Ethiopia and religion are inextricably linked since very early times. Christianity was introduced to the country in the year 330 CE by the Orthodox patriarchate of Alexandria, and in fact, long before, Judaism was already there. Later on in 615 CE Islam was adopted. Therefore, the whole history of the country and the entire life of the community in one or other way are highly related to those religions. This can be evidenced by holidays, and festivals the people celebrate and enjoy *en mass*. Furthermore, in Ethiopia, a new day is introduced with the early morning Muslim call for *Solat* followed by the Orthodox Christian bell for praying which shows the religiosity of the country. Since the history of religions in Ethiopia is almost similar to the history of the country, religions are wealthy interims of tangible and intangible heritage. Especially the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church despite the many distractions the church has faced at different times, is the most significant in terms of heritage and history. Tourists should be guided to learn more about the sites they visit through clarification of them by exhibits, animations and sign age which guides tourists (Nicolaidis, 2016).

The tangible and intangible dimensions of the heritages contribute to the significance of the Lalibela town as a sacred or religious site. By contrast, there are problems which greatly influence religious tourism development in the Christian holy town of Lalibela. Some of them include begging, hassling, limited infrastructure, expansion of nonreligious activities and businesses like illicit trafficking and nightclubs, limited community participation in decision making, robbery and degradation of heritage, and a general lack of good governance. These mentioned and other problems affected tourism in general and religious tourism in particular in the study area, either directly or indirectly. Furthermore, tourism and/or religious tourism development are facing the following additional problems: lack of awareness in the local community and administration; lack of cooperation among stakeholders of tourism in the town like the city administration, hoteliers, local farmers, tour guides, the church (Monastery) administration and others. Therefore, appropriate measures to avoid or minimize problems are inevitable if tourism is to be better developed and sustainable.

Though religious tourism has multiple benefits that could change religious villages like Lalibela, these are not forthcoming unless proper control mechanisms are established and applied. Thus as things stand, religious-based tourism might lead to the deterioration of priceless heritage, degradation of culture, pollution of the environment and so on. Therefore, policymakers should manage the identified drawbacks of religious tourism development in the study area while enhancing and conserving its precious resource endowments.

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