A GEOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL TOURISM IN NORTH ETHIOPIA: A CASE STUDY

MUSHIR ALI
Assistant Professor
Department of Geography and Environmental Studies
Mekelle University, P.B. 451, Mekelle
Ethiopia, North East Africa

ABEBE DAJEN
Associated with Department of Geography and Environmental Studies
Bahir Dar University, P.B. 79, Bahir Dar
Ethiopia, North East Africa

ABSTRACT

The present work attempts that the preserved historical traditions with the Ethiopian Orthodox Churches of Lalibela and their various attractive cultural festivals, ceremonies and rituals those attract the tourists from the different parts of the world as well as from Ethiopia. The study was conducted to assess historical and cultural backgrounds of the Lalibela churches to pull domestic and foreign tourists, to describe arrival, distance covered, mode of transport used, and purposes of visiting and to analyse the views of tourists regarding cultural tourism in Lalibela. The work is based on primary and
secondary sources of data. It analyses that tourists from different countries and every part of Ethiopia arrived to Lalibela for the visiting of churches. The tourists considered Lalibela as one the best places to see but lack of proper and accurate information, carelessness, and ignorance about tourism as professional motive.

**Key words**: geography, culture, tourism, facilities and problems.

**INTRODUCTION**

Tourism is one rapidly growing industries on economic spaces of the world which contribute to reduce poverty and under development. Now-a-days it has been considered as radar for expanding economic sector of the economy in many ways in developing countries those sustained 7-12% per year growth in tourism. Local and national perspective, it is being seen as a route to broader development and shared growth, to generate foreign exchange. It is incorporated as a central part by the policy makers in the strategies of poverty reduction in more than 80% of low income countries particularly in sub-Saharan Africa which preserved historical traditions, charming monuments and rich in cultural and natural tourism (ODI 2007, Kukret 2006).

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO 2005), cultural tourism is considered as the movements of persons for essentially cultural motivations such as study tours, performing arts and cultural tours, travel to festivals and other cultural events, visits to sites and monuments, travel to study nature, folklore or art, and pilgrimages. The central idea refers to the cultural motivation for travelling. Cultural tourism has been shaped one of the most dynamic crucial aspects of the tourism sector cultural tourism in Ethiopia. It has a significant economic and social role such as foreign exchange earnings, employment opportunity, revenue for government, integration of
national cultures and societies (Amhara tourism 2005). As, Ethiopia is hold as one of the tourist paradises in the sub-Saharan African region regarding great antiquity, with a culture and traditions dating back more than 3000 years. Indeed it has major destinations in the East of Africa to attract both international and domestic tourists. There are typical natural and cultural attractions as national parks including endemic wild animals, historic route and historical monuments, such as the Axumite stale, the royal palaces of Gondar and the medieval churches of Lalibela in north Ethiopia (Yabibal 2010).

However, according to Tourism and Leisure Education (ATLAS) program, cultural heritage tourism of Ethiopia shares about 0.03%. It is tiny when compared to other cultural World Heritage Sites in developing countries those competing for the cultural heritage market (World Bank 2006).

The rock-hewn churches of Lalibela are center of pilgrimage and cultural tourism since 13-14th century and favorite tourist destination has been started from the 16th century. It is a place to discover ancient architecture and culture where 11 churches curved from the red cobalt basalt rock. UNESCO listed the rock-hewn churches, as world heritage in 1997. Both domestic and international tourists visit for historical and cultural motives and for education and study. Domestic tourists need to be motivated on searching the culture, social life, and cultural gifts. Being a centre of cultural tourism at least 30 thousands tourists visit every year (Jionathan and Chistopher 2009). Moerover, Lalibela tourism faces unsatisfactory community participation, inefficient government contribution, lack of proper services and lower level of awareness among service providers.
OBJECTIVES

Keeping consideration the view of significance for cultural tourism, the study was conducted in Lalibela with following objectives

- To assess historical and cultural backgrounds those attract domestic and foreign tourists.
- To describe arrival, distance, mode of transport, and purposes to reach Lalibela.
- To analyse the prevailing problems and views of tourists regarding cultural tourism.

DATA AND METHODS

The work is based on the primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were generated through field survey in 2010. On the basis purposive sampling 180 tourists were interviewed out them, 120 were foreigners and 60 belonged to different regions of Ethiopia. The questions were asked regarding their travelling, covered distance, mode of transport, facilities and constraints, Lalibela as a tourist centre. The discussions were made to know their views regarding overall assessment and improvement. Secondary data were collected from Amhara Cultural and Tourism Bureau, Lalibela Tourism office, related different published material. The collected data were tabulated and analyzed by using simple statistical technique, maps and diagrams those were prepared with the help of computer cartography and GIS technique.

STUDY AREA

Lalibela by road is 700 km from Addis Ababa and 300 km from Bahir Dar. It is situated in the Semien (North) Wollo zone of the Amhara ethnic diversion at 2,500 meters above Sea level.
Latitudinal and longitudinal extension is 12° 02’ N to 12°039’ N, and 39° 02’ E to 39.033°E. Lalibela town previously known as ROHA is situated in Lalibela district over 2,800 sq km consisting 312,000 population. More than 90% of the population belongs to the Orthodox Christian Church (CSA 2007).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lalibela is one of Ethiopia’s oldest and holiest cities known for its monolithic orthodox churches. This town is known around the world for its churches carved from the living rock, which play an important part in the history of rock-cut architecture. The layout of the major buildings in Lalibela is widely accepted, especially by the local clergy, to be a symbolic New Jerusalem where many features have Biblical names even the town’s river is known as the river Jordan. It was the capital of Ethiopia from 12th to the 13th century (Gobezie 2004).

Issues related to the problem of identifying the primary objective and three ideas have been identified to build the monuments in Lalibela. The Lalibela monuments were pre-Christian pagan temples and later converted to churches with the addition of some
Christian symbols. The few churches might be constructed initially to be palaces, royal residences, and courts for justices, treasures or for other secular purposes (UNESCO/CLT/WHC 2007).

The people that suggested the first idea have tried to reason out their views considering some paintings as symbols of pre-Christian pagan gods and goddesses. But according to the traditions of the churches, each painting has its own interpretation related to Christianity. On the other hand the discovery of archaeological findings such as ancient pottery, a large copper plate and iron chains from the two churches in 1966 also strengthened the idea of the people who emphasized the initial secular purpose of Bete Gebriel and Bete Merkorios (Finneran 2008).

Thirdly, the people that believe the churches originally as Christian worship centers say that many churches were built in one place mainly because each of them symbolizes things of either earthly or heavenly Jerusalem. The first group symbolizes earthly Jerusalem and the second group represents heavenly Jerusalem. They also pointed out that the king Lalibela by inspiring Jerusalem attempted to create another (second) holy land in Ethiopia (UNESCO 2007). His ambition to introduce symbolizing Jerusalem and the holy sepulcher that is clearly stated in Zena Lalibela (The life of Lalibela) as follows “I blessed this place and from now onwards let it be a holy places as mount tabor, the place of my dreams figuration, as colcothar the place of my crucification and as serves alum the land of my mother and where I took flesh from her pure flesh if a man a bides in it an undertakes pilgrimage to it, it is as equal as if he went to my sepulchers in Jerusalem”.

The following monuments have been serving as churches since the time of construction in their chronological order of construction (Table 1).
Table 1 shows detail about the different architectural aspects of the holy rock churches. It is believed Bete mariam was built firstly and Bete Giorgis at the last that is the most elegant and retimed church that probably represents the apogee the rock hewn church tradition. The Lalibela churches have many features in common with the indigenous Axumite architecture. Bete Amanuel with its horizontal projections and indentations is an excellent example of Axumite architecture. In addition to the indigenous style of architecture, churches were decorated with columns, walls, paintings, bas relief figures, variety of widow shaper and other architectural elements (Finneran 2008).
ARRIVAL OF TOURIST

Tourists move from their formal residence to different places for holidays, recreation, leisure activities and other purposes contribute to employment and cultural interaction. According Tourism office of Lalibela total tourism activities are increasing every year not only by international tourists but also domestic tourists.

Fig. 2 depicts that the total tourists 19185 visited Lalibela in 2006 and 36100 in 2010; their number increased 88.17% from 2006. Moreover, foreign tourists 18510 arrived in 2007 their population raised 16.92%, 27.48%, and 36.28% during 2009, 2008 and 2010. Domestic tourists increased more than four times as they were 2027 in the year 2007 and 8848 in 2010 to visit the holy place. The rapid growth of domestic tourists reflects changes in income level of the Ethiopians, and escalation in the GDP of the county and expansion of connectivity to Lalibela particularly roads.
Fig 3 Arrival of Tourists from different corners of the Globe at Lalibela

DISTANCE COVERED BY TOURISTS

Table 2 indicates that a big segment of tourists (53.33%) arrived from Amhara, Tigray, Oromaiya, Southern National Nationalities Region, Kaffa, and Somali Regional states covered about 1000 km. Other tourists travelled the distance to reach Lalibela from adjacent countries, i.e., Kenya, Sudan between 1000-2000km; as well as Asian, European and American countries except South Africa (Fig 3).
TABLE 2 DISTANCE COVERED BY TOURISTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distance covered (km)</th>
<th>Share of respondents (%)</th>
<th>Native lands respondents (Domestic &amp; Foreign)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below 500</td>
<td>40.00</td>
<td>Addis Ababa, Dese, Dere Dawa,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500-1000</td>
<td>13.33</td>
<td>Bahir Dar, Gonder, Debark, Jima,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Arba Minch, and Dere dawa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000-2000</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>Brazil, USA, Hungary, France, UK,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 2000</td>
<td>36.67</td>
<td>Germany, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Israel, India,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Philippines, Sri Lanka, China, Japan, South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Africa, Sudan, and Kenya</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on field survey, 2010, N=180

MODE OF TRANSPORTATION USED BY TOURISTS

Fig 4 shows that the favorite mode of transport among the sampled tourists was airways which connected the different tourism sites, i.e., Bahir dar, Gonder, Lalibela and Harar from Addis Ababa in a tourism circle by Ethiopian Airlines.

![Fig 4 Means of Transport used by Tourists](source: Based on field survey, 2010)
Therefore, 40% tourists enjoyed journey by the air transportation to reach Lalibela. It is followed by buses/mini-buses they are available to connect intermediate terminals Woldia and Debre Tabor. These places have a good accessibility from every corner of the country that is why at least 37% foreign and domestic tourists used the buses and mini-buses from these nodes. There were 23.33% tourists who travelled their journey by car or taxi to arrive Lalibela. The tourists described that they hired car/taxi to enjoy the panoramic views of different physical and social landscapes during the journey. However, the travel by car or hired taxi is expensive in terms money and time.

PURPOSES OF VISITING

It was recorded during field survey that both domestic and international tourists visited Lalibela for different purposes. The highest proportion of the tourists (70%) mainly domestic tourists was found for pilgrimage.

While international tourists told that they were primarily historical motive (cultural motive) and knowledge seeking (education and study). The notion Lalibela as 8th wonder of the world was not supported by the both types of visitors. Domestic tourists were interested to devote themselves for spiritual and cultural obligations; as a result their arrival generally
has been recorded at high rate and particularly at the time different cultural festival related to the Orthodox Church.

COMMON PROBLEMS FACED BY TOURISTS

The common problems related services as hotel services, tour guide and transport services faced by tourists were recoded as shortage of service access (54%), low quality in goods and services (28%), poor communication and transportation (20%), insufficient transportation (8%) and high price (6%). The main influential facilities were shortage of accommodation during the peak season (October to January) and festivals (Gena or Christmas (every Jan 7), Timket or Epiphany (every Jan 20), Fasica or Easter, and Kidus Yohanes or Ethiopian New year (every Sep 11). They are colorful celebrations of Lalibela, when thousand of people around the globe as well as every corner of Ethiopia attend the special ceremonies since long ago.

![Fig 6 Problems faced by tourists](source: Based on field survey, 2010)

During field survey respondents reported that the services related accommodations, tourist guides, the behavior of the concerned authorized persons was not matching a standard level and inappropriate particularly for foreigners. The guides were not trained enough to convey and explain the facts-figures of culture, monument and its holiness as well as
significance in English properly. Moreover, telecommunication and internet services were not capable and sufficient to connect the rest world at 24 hours every day of a week. In spite of including this place as world heritage sites, it is not well access with all weather roads with frequent services of buses and taxies. Discrimination in charges was recorded at office level, for accommodation, and prices of food, beverage and different traditional symbolic items as gift, souvenir and provisional goods. When foreigners want to use the services or purchase items, the charges appear higher than that of domestic tourists.

**STATUS OF SERVICES RELATED TO TOURISTS**

Table 3 highlights views of the tourists regarding tourism supporting services. At least half (47.78%) of the respondents pointed out that Lalibela tourism was in a moderate condition. It followed by those kept status of tourism in good category, 17.78% favoured for very good rank of the tourism in their opinions, however, this category was more supported by female tourists (19.35%) than that of their counterpart (16.95%).

**TABLE 3 ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES AT DIFFERENT LEVEL RELATED LALIBELA TOURISM**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Tourism Services</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>6.45</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>49.15</td>
<td>45.16</td>
<td>47.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>28.81</td>
<td>29.03</td>
<td>28.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>16.95</td>
<td>19.35</td>
<td>17.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Based on field survey, 2010*
A small proportion (5.56%) of tourists expressed their views for low level of existed services and hospitality for the tourism. However, there was no one supported for excellent rank of current tourism activities in Lalibela.

CONCLUSIONS

The cultural tourism is one the important attraction features of Ethiopia have huge potential to attract foreign and domestic tourists. Lalibela is Ethiopia’s top attraction regarding cultural tourism; there are the beautiful landscapes on the way to monasteries and rock-hewn churches, historic monasteries, religious ceremonies, traditional wear of life of the people. Cultural tourism of Lalibela attracted the people different corners of the globe including Ethiopia, i.e., Brazil, USA, Hungry, France, UK, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Israel, India, Philippines, Sri Lanka China, Japan, South Africa, Sudan and Kenya. Domestic tourist visit Lalibela for pilgrimage while international tourists are attracted by cultural motivations. Current situation of the tourism sector in Lalibela indicates that it is moderately developed where at the local level management fail to expand tourism related services at a standard level. Tourist’s length of stay was for a short period of time and their flow was seasonal. Visiting Lalibela by plane is the best; road transportation was not more influenced to tourists. Lack of services like hotels, road, skilled man power and discrimination in prices, hospitality by local community and less quality services were common features.

Generally the main constraints to the growth and development of tourism sector, include lack of good marketing strategy, lack of harmonization between those administrating tourist attractions and tourist operations, poor infrastructure around the tourist attraction area, poor utilization those resources, and lack of effective visitor relationship.
As it is clear that Lalibela has been recognized for a potential of the country interims of tourism industry, but the performance of the place was not satisfactory. To improve cultural tourism in Lalibela, some following suggestions can be recommended.

- In order to utilize Lalibela as a centre of cultural tourism, it requires special attention from national, regional and local government. Tourism policy that can involve best communities on the general planning, operating and controlling functions.
- The rule of the government can develop tourism policy to solve financial constraints, and set roles and regulations for providing tourism services, formulate mechanisms to standardization and quality of services by license as well as by contributing materials and organizing training programs.
- To improve the current promotion strategy the accuracy of the history and culture of the attractions is necessary. Therefore, strict rule and regulations should be developed for local tour guides regarding to avoid wrong expression and certify a standard of qualified guides to gain a better image of Lalibela than today.
- To identify more service providers to operate which would create competition to improve quality of services especially related to hotel, restaurant, and tourist guides and a continuous monitoring is necessary to the level standard and prices.
- The government and other tourism related organizations need to help the host community by motivation and orientation programs to give shape for cooperative behavior of locals to create a healthy environment to enhance arrival of tourists.
- Cultural and historical dignity of the people should keep by building typical houses especially; around the churches and souvenir manufacturing and local-made materials should be supported properly.
- In General, tourism can be most effectiveness percolated at the local level, if government efforts should develop networking with service providers, communities
and tourism facilitators in the direction of effective tourism development and to change the negative image (political unstable, hunger and starvation) of the country.

REFERENCES

- Amhara National Regional State Culture, Tourism & Parks Development Bureau, 2010