

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Challenges and future perspectives of cultural heritage for a sustainable tourism development in Ethiopia: evidences from Rock Hewn Church of Lalibela**

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The rock hewn churches of Lalibela are among the nine tangible sites in Ethiopia registered in the world heritage list. The study was carried out to assess and identify the major challenges and future perspectives of Rock Hewn Churches of Lalibela (RHCL) for a sustainable tourism development in Ethiopia. The study used concurrent mixed method of data collection such as questionnaire, interview, observation and document review. A total of 288 respondents from local communities and visitors were used for collecting primary information via semi-structured questioner. The majority of respondents are participating in tourism sector such as in accommodation, shopping, hotel, cooking and traditional performance, serving as priest and being experts in the city administration office of culture and tourism. Despite its importance, regarding the negative impact of tourism; the majority of respondents 70 (63.6%) agreed and 27 (24.3%) disagree for the question "tourism has increased the level of commercialized culture in Lalibela town. Around 87.6% of the respondents were their first trip to visit the RHCL. Hence, among the RHCL Bete Amanuel, Bete Abba Libanos, Bete Medhanealem, Bete Merkorios, Bete Giorgis are highly endangered in the parts such as roof, pillars, interior and exterior parts cracking due to the newly constructed shelter load and geological, climate and biological factors. The conservation and maintenance works used to sustain tourism practices in Lalibela lacks adequacy. Therefore, the stakeholders of the RHCL such as government organizations, local community, civil societies and development investors must work to meet standards for conserving and sustaining tourism development practices in Ethiopia, particularly in Lalibela town.

**Key words:** Conservation, Ethiopia, Lalibela, sustainable, 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

(Berhanu, 2018). The tourism industry plays multiple roles in the economy, socio-culture, and environment of different countries of the world. The most widely

recognized outcomes of tourism include providing employment, incomes, taxes revenues and foreign exchange (Nicolaidis, 2016; Suleiman and Mohamed, 2010). According to Nicolaidis (2016), tourism is an activity of human beings moving and staying in places outside their permanent residence and environment for recreation, business and trade purposes. UNCTAD (2007) reported that, presently tourism is progressively getting to be a vital economic sector in numerous developing countries.

The industries were one of the major sources of foreign exchange earnings and the most viable and sustainable economic development option (UNWTO, 2011). Ethiopia is a country where all the religions, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and traditional belief systems are represented. The country also has a long historical tradition of inter-religious tolerance in which all religions live in peace and love (Berhanu, 2018). Lalibela town 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 eleven rock hewn churches with ecclesiastical elements, warm and colorful yearly religious festivals, and an eye catching geographical location. The rock-hewn churches of Lalibela are one of the foremost tourist destination sites within the country. The property was among the first twelve sites to be inscribed by UNESCO on the World Heritage List in 1978 (Elene, 2010). Being a living heritage, the site consists of a range of material and non-material cultural components that constitute an important part of the local community and their traditional way of life (Pankhurst, 2005).

Furthermore, Lalibela is the holy city at the heart of Ethiopia. It is perched on an isolated mountain top, with sweeping vistas of the Ethiopian landscape and the eleven rock-hewn churches are simply spectacular, connected by elaborate underground corridors. According to Mitchell and Coles (2009), the churches have in this manner kept on appeal thousands of domestic and international visitors every year. Likewise, Ethiopia is rich in both natural and cultural tourism resources and conversely, it's economic, socio-cultural and environmental role is insignificant due to problems mainly related to the lack of infrastructural development and lack of proper conservation and renovation of cultural heritages (Demoz and Mesele, 2017). In order to make tourism development more sustainable, it is important to look into the problems associated with the conservation preservation and renovation of cultural heritages. In addition, there is also lack of studies concerning the

challenges in conservation and renovation techniques for cultural heritages in Ethiopia. Among other challenges mentioned and lack of attention from UNESCO and other responsible organizations and communities were among the major concerns (Demoz and Mesele, 2017).

Recently most heritages including Rock Hewn Churches of Lalibela are threatened by both man-made and natural agents. Among the threats, levels of awareness of local communities about sustainable tourism development, lack of sustainable tourism practice, lack of attention and integrities of responsible parties and absence of skilled personnel in regard to the heritage conservation and renovation practices are the most series challenges of cultural heritage management in Lalibela. It is timely and crucial to address these problems and look for resources which would help to preserve and maintain the heritages. This study therefore, seeks to asses and identifies the challenges and future perspectives of cultural heritage for a sustainable tourism development in Lalibela Rock Hewn Church, Ethiopia.

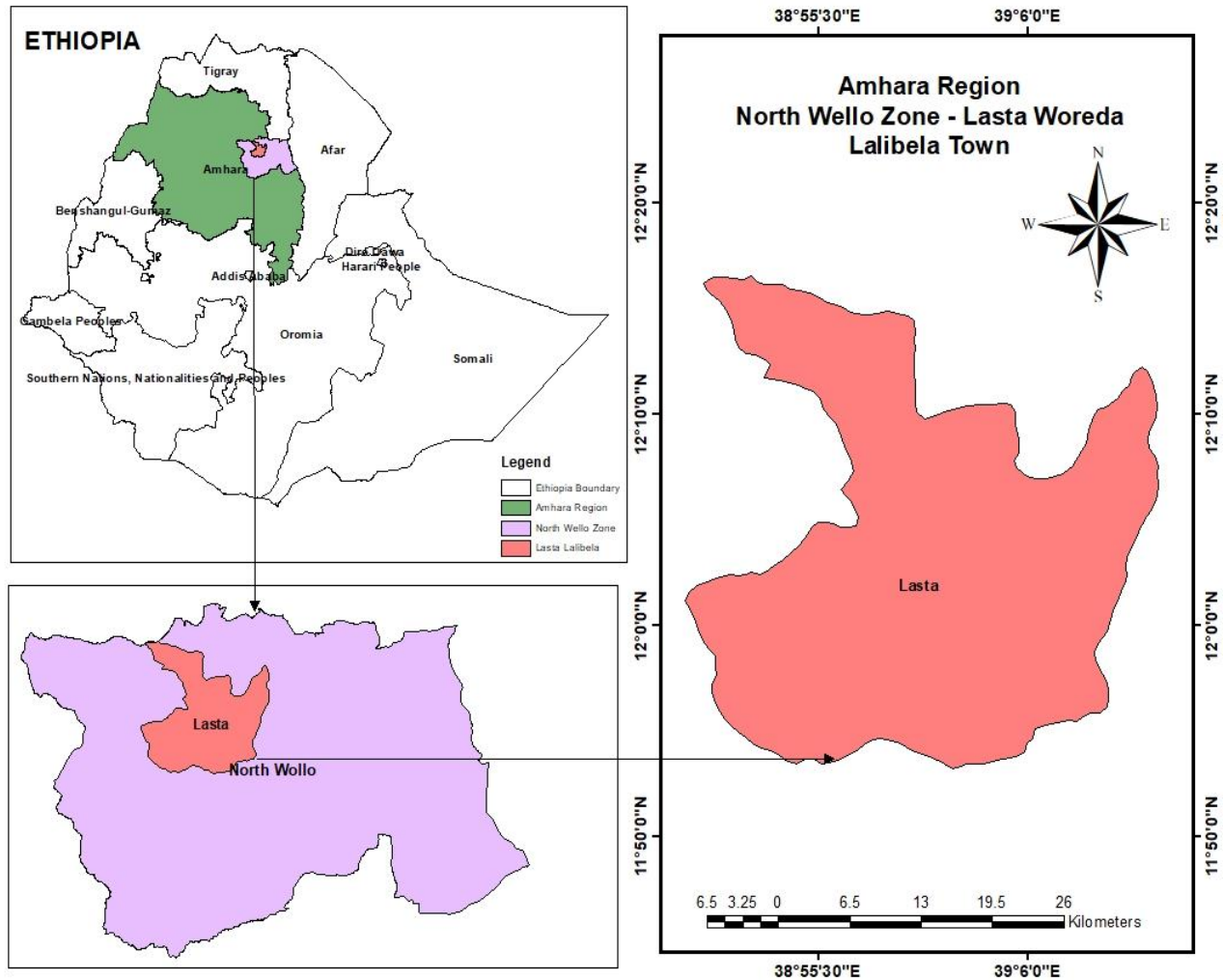
## METHODOLOGY

### Description of the study area

The research was conducted in the town of Lalibela which is found in North Wollo Administrative Zone of the Amhara Regional State and about 700 km north of Addis Ababa. Geographically, Lalibela is situated at 12° 02'034"N latitude and 39° 02'611" E longitude (Figure 1). The landscape of the town is characterized by a rugged topography on a mountain in a picturesque setting at 2630 m above sea level. While crossing the town, various landscape structures ranging from gentle slope to steep slope are easily identifiable. 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 (Berhanu, 2018). Lalibela Woreda has total population of 118,185 living in 21 kebeles. From this 58648 are male while the remaining 59537 female (Lasta Woreda Communication Office Report, 2018/19). The population is unevenly distributed in varying geographical setting. The main economic activities in Lasta Woreda (peoples who are living in the surrounding of Lalibela Town) are mixed farming, livestock rearing and paid agricultural labor. Crop production is highly affected by frequently inconsistent rainfall in the single, main rainy season. Agricultural performance is also affected by environmental degradation and soil fertility (Amhara Livelihood Zone Reports, 2005).

According to Mengistu (2012), the town is devoid of vegetation, except for small patches of bushes and shrubs. A long period of human occupation, extensive agricultural practices, overgrazing, cutting trees for firewood and rapid growth of population are the major factors usually suggested for the degradation of the

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**Figure 1.** Country map of Ethiopia, showing geographic location of study area, (Map credit: computed by the author).

environment within Lalibela and its surroundings. The church area, the major identity of Lalibela is located along the main gravel surface road, almost at the center of the town. It consists of three groups of churches that connect them. The area covered by these church structures measures around 25 ha (Mengistu, 2012). The eleven medieval monolithic cave churches of this 13th-century 'New Jerusalem' are situated in a mountainous region in the heart of Ethiopia near a traditional village with circular-shaped dwellings. Lalibela is a high place of Ethiopian Christianity, still today a place of pilgrimage and devotion.

**Research design and data sources**

According to Creswell (2003), a mixed methods design is useful to capture the best of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Best and Kahn (1989) also suggest that descriptive survey research helps to describe and interpret the actual event that exists now and existed in the past and that have the influence in the present and tries to make the necessary recommendation for adjustment.

Therefore, the study used mixed research design so as to identify the major challenges and future perspectives of RHCL for a sustainable tourism development in Ethiopia. Hence, the study used both qualitative and quantitative research approach in order to augment and enhance it. The key informants of this study were selected purposefully so as to include all the concerned stakeholders. Thus, local community representatives such as clergy's, local guides, Lalibela Town Administration, Culture and Tourism Office experts, domestic and international tourists were the main subjects of the study. This research work was basically depending on primary and secondary data as main sources of information. To collect the primary and secondary data, different instruments including: questionnaires, interviews, field observations, documents and audio-visual resources were used.

**Sample size and sampling technique**

The target population in which the sample for this study were selected as a source of information for the research comprises of

**Table 1.** Sample size of the study.

S/N	Respondent	Total population	Required sample in (%)	Sample size
1	Admin staff and clergy's of the church (Priests and Deacons)	816	10	82
	Local Guide	195	>>	20
	LTACTO	40	>>	4
	Hotel and Loge Owners	44	>>	4
	Visitors	5327 per month (Average), 178 per day, 1780 in 10 days	>>	178
<b>Total sample size</b>				<b>288</b>

In addition to the above sample size, the researcher was gathered the information from the LTACTO experts and the Church Admin Staff representatives following the interview guide.

Source: Lalibela Church Admin Office and LTACTO 6th month report, 2019.

local community representatives living in the Lalibela town such as the church admin staffs, clergy's, local guides, Lalibela Town Administration Culture and Tourism Office experts (LTACTO) and visitors. Purposive sampling method was employed to determine a representative sample size. Accordingly, from the total of targeted populations 2875 from each category (local communities and visitors) 10% of respondents selected purposively to collect required data about the research problems and alternative solutions. Thus, a total of 288 respondents from local communities and visitors were used for collecting primary information via semi-structured questioner and 10 representatives of local communities were also used for the interview as shown in Table 1.

#### Data collection

According to Best and Kahn (1989), it is necessary to employ multiple methods of data collection in order to maintain the trustworthiness of the qualitative and quantitative research. Therefore, the study used concurrent mixed method of data collection such as questionnaire, interview, site observation and document review to collect the adequate, valid and reliable research data. As described in the above section, the researcher used both primary and secondary data from different data sources. Primary data was collected from local communities such as clergy's, local guides, Lalibela Town Administration Culture and Tourism Office experts (LTACTO) and visitors through questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire were designed and used as the main instrument for primary data collection with the aim to assess the need for conservation of cultural heritages for a sustainable tourism development in rock hewn churches of Lalibela. On the other hand, secondary data such as reports, books, published articles and others were used as secondary sources of data. Observation checklist was used as the main data gathering instrument since the purpose of the study is to identify the challenges and future perspectives of cultural heritage for a sustainable tourism development in Lalibela Rock Hewn Churches. Furthermore, the researcher tried to observe: (1) the tourist attractions in the area and around and free for movement of tourists; (2) tourist amenities and accommodations in terms of water supply and accessibility of sanitary; (3) tourist infrastructure facility such as road availability and easy transport, play stations which can elongate tourists stay, banks ATM, credit card, internet and other

facilities.

#### Data analysis

The collected data through questionnaires were entered in to computer through the use of computer software called Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20, and were analyzed by using descriptive and inferential (statistical) method of data analysis. Descriptive statistics was employed to reveal the main features of the gathered data in the study. Quantitative data was also analyzed, interpreted and reported using frequency distribution and percentages followed by discussion of the most important points. The data gathered through open-ended questions, interviews, observation and document investigation were analyzed qualitatively through descriptive narration.

#### Ethical considerations

The researcher respect the rights, values and desires of interviewees and the necessary institutional consent was communicated with the responsible person of the church administrative leaders and LTACTO experts before conducting the study. Similarly, the informants were briefed about the main objectives of the study before the beginning of data collection. The participants were also transparently informed that the information they provided in the questionnaire and interview was only used for the research purpose and strictly anonymous and dealt with confidentially.

## DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

### Overview of Rock Hewn Churches of Lalibela (RHCL)

The exact period of construction and the number of year that it took for completing them are other blurred issues regarding the RHCL. Some historians attribute their data to the late 12 century. Local tradition dates the

**Table 2.** Categories and list of RCH.

<b>Group</b>	<b>Name of the church and their chronological order of construction</b>
First group	Bete Mariam (House of Merry)
	Bete Medhanealem (House of savior of the world)
	Bete Debre Sinai (House of mount Sinai and Gologotha, twin churches)
	Bete Gologotha (House of mount Sinai and Gologotha, twin churches)
	Bete Meskel (House of the cross)
	Bete Denagel (House of virgins)
Second group	Bete Gebriel (House of St Gebriel)
	Bete Abba Libanos (House of father Libanos)
	Bete Merkorios (House of Merkorios)
	Bete Amanuel (House of Emanuel)
Third group	Bete Giorgis (House of St George)

Source: Mengistu (2012); <https://whc.unesco.org>.

construction of the church 1150s to the end of 1170s. It is also stated that construction of all of the church was completed within 23-30 years (Mengistu, 2012). The well-known RHCL are eleven in number. According to their location, they are divided into three groups, separated by the seasonal river Jourdan. In addition, local evidences list the churches in their chronological order of construction and their group as stated in Table 2. The life of local community in Lalibela is related to the churches: physically the people live around them, economically the churches are the main sources of income, and spiritually the peoples belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church. Each circumstance within the town of Lalibela and its surroundings generally has religious orientation. The church participates in all socio cultural activities. The economic activity of the town is mainly depending on religious activity (involved in tourism), small farming system and commercial activities such as hotels, bars, restaurants and souvenir shops. The town and its rock hewn church has lots of important treasures such as Afro Aygeba Cross, religious festivals (Genna and Timket) and Ashenda culture festival and traditional houses (Tukuls).

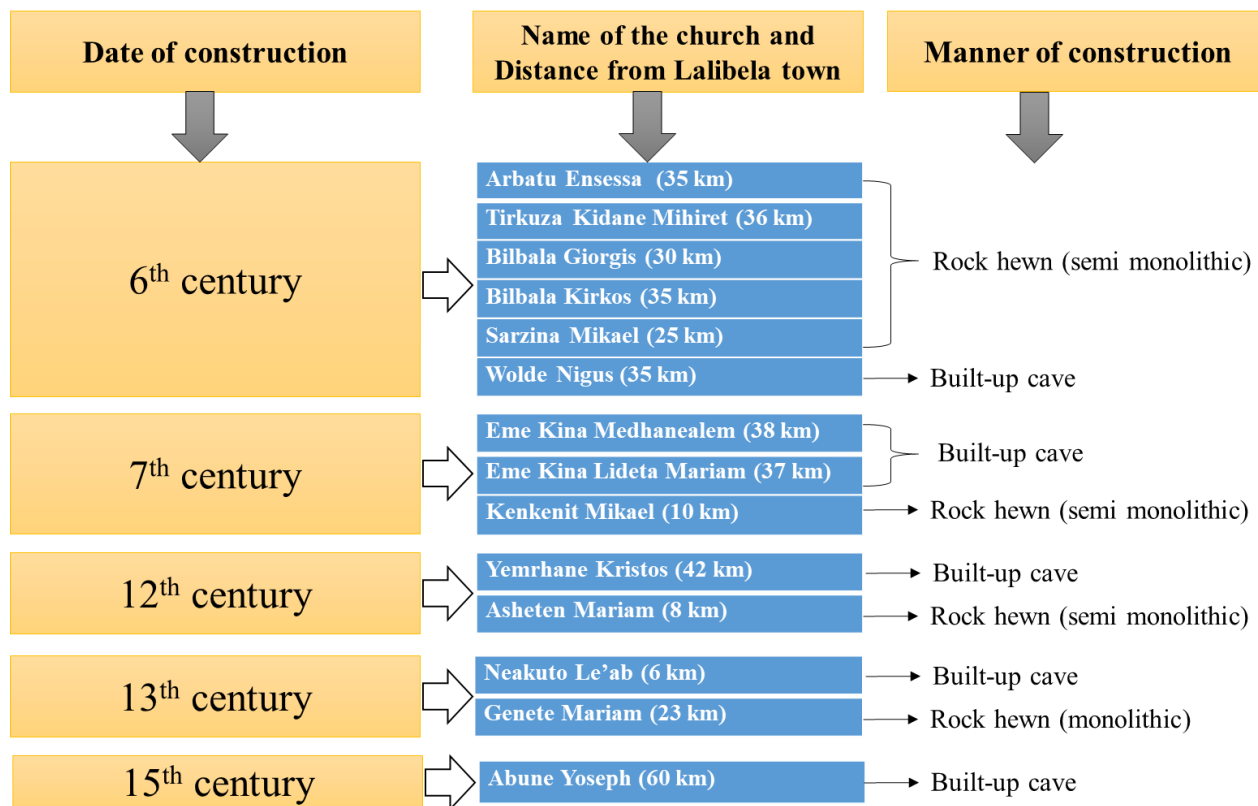
Additionally the town is situated in having different churches in the surrounding which leads the rural communities benefitted in different socio-cultural and economic values. According to the information collected from the Lalibela Town Administration of Culture and Tourism Office (LTACTO), the responsible body (Amhara Regional State and/or the LTACTO did not promote and change it in to tourism business; the cultural and attraction sites found in surrounding of Lalibela town and this affect the flow of visitors in Lalibela and its surrounding. In general, there are a number of well-

known rock hewn churches surrounding those of RHCL (Figure 2).

### **Local communities perception on RHCL**

#### ***Benefits from tourism***

The research result reveals that, tourism has increased the opportunities of employment and the pride over the RHCL. This is because there is a potential demand for hotel and hospitality sector since increasing the construction of hotels and tourist flow. One of the interviewee responses also describes the same result. Secondly, as described in Table 3, the respondents choose the benefits of tourism is mainly for creating the quality way of life in the town. Thirdly, as per the respondents' response, tourism has a potential to create a positive attitude in the minds of the community towards creative or innovative works and attract investment and local development projects to the town of Lalibela. Finally, according to the local community's perception, tourism has fostered the acquisition of new skills for the community of the town, improved the infrastructure facilities and maintained the rock hewn churches of Lalibela better. This matches with the researcher's observation and the information obtained from the interviewees that many tourism activities going on in the study area such as cultural goods and services, souvenirs, paintings, local tour guides etc. Moreover, the majority of respondents are participating in tourism sector such as in accommodation, shopping, hotel, cooking and traditional performance, serving as priest and being experts in the city administration office of culture and



**Figure 2.** Summary of prominent rock churches around the RHCL. Source: LFACTO (2018), unpublished document; Mengistu (2012).

**Table 3.** Respondent’s perception on benefits of tourism to the communities and Lalibela town.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about benefits from tourism?	Mean	Std. deviation
Tourism has increased the opportunity of employment in the town of Lalibela	4.0	1.2
Tourism has increased the quality of life in the town of Lalibela.	3.6	1.2
Tourism has increased my pride over the rock hewn churches of Lalibela	4.0	1.3
Tourism has created a positive attitude in the minds of the community towards creative or innovative works	3.5	1.2
Tourism has fostered the acquisition of new skills for the community of the town	3.3	1.4
Tourism has attracted investment and local development projects to the town of Lalibela	3.5	1.3
Tourism in Lalibela has improved the infrastructure facilities	2.8	1.4

Source: Own data (2019).

tourism. As per the result, the details of local community perception in regarding the benefits of tourism to themselves and to the town are described in Table 3.

The number of tourist arrivals in Lalibela has been increasing over time (Table 4). For instance, the tourist flow grew nearly by 45% from 2006 to 2011 (Temesgen,

2013). Several factors could be attributed to its increment, among others, the sense of a living heritage and the uninterrupted use of the churches as sacred places of worship leads most visitors to visit Lalibela these days (Elene, 2010). As far as Lalibela is concerned, though it is underperforming as compared to

**Table 4.** Respondent's perception on negative impact of tourism in Lalibela town.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about negative impact of tourism in RHCL?	Levels of agreement	Frequency	Percentage
Tourism disrupts the peaceful ways of life of the community in the town	Strongly disagree	34	30.9
	Disagree	29	26.4
	Neutral	11	10.0
	Agree	13	11.8
	Strongly agree	23	20.9
Tourism has increased the level of litter in Lalibela town	Strongly disagree	20	18.2
	Disagree	29	26.4
	Neutral	13	11.8
	Agree	30	27.3
	Strongly agree	18	16.3
Tourism has increased the crime rate in Lalibela town	Strongly disagree	21	19.1
	Disagree	29	26.4
	Neutral	19	17.3
	Agree	22	20.0
	Strongly agree	19	17.3
Tourism has increased the level of commercialization of the culture in Lalibela town	Strongly disagree	12	10.9
	Disagree	15	13.6
	Neutral	13	11.8
	Agree	33	30.0
	Strongly agree	37	33.6
Most tourists visiting rock hewn church in Lalibela are not considerate of local people	Strongly disagree	21	19.1
	Disagree	27	24.5
	Neutral	18	16.4
	Agree	22	20.0
	Strongly agree	22	20.0
Tourism has unfairly increased the cost of living in Lalibela town	Strongly disagree	12	10.9
	Disagree	9	8.2
	Neutral	12	10.9
	Agree	24	21.8
	Strongly agree	53	48.2

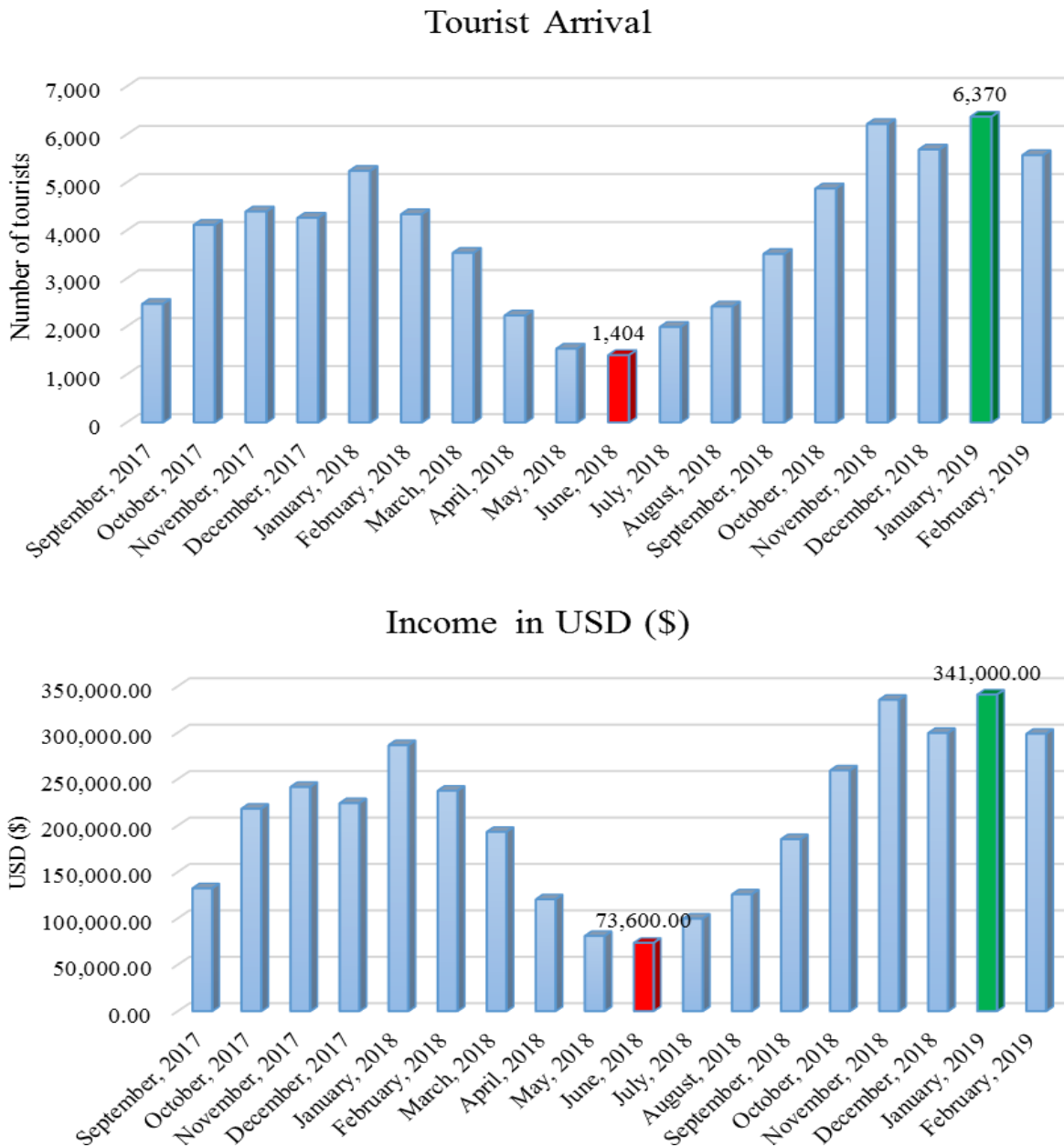
Source: Computed by the author.

other countries' destinations, locally, it is considered as one of the flagship destinations in terms of attracting a relatively large number of tourists. Temesgen (2013) stated in its study that Lalibela is one of the premier destinations in Ethiopia that is able to attract around 90% of the leisure tourists who visit Ethiopia. In particular, during the main Ethiopian religious festivities such as Ethiopian Christmas and Epiphany, a large number of domestic and foreign visitors visit Lalibela. According to

the church administration information, the tourist flow information from September, 2017 up to February, 2019 was described in Figure 3.

#### ***Negative impacts of tourism on communities living around RHCL***

According to the majority of local communities response,



**Figure 3.** Tourist arrival and generated income in USD (\$) between September 2017 - February 2019 in RHCL. Source: The church administration ticket office, RHCL (2019).

63 (57.3) disagreed and 36 (32.7%) agree for the question “tourism disrupts the peaceful ways of life of the community in the town”. From the response of visitors for the survey question “tourism has increased the level of litter in Lalibela town” 49 (44.6) and 48 (43.6%) disagree and agree respectively. On the contrary, 50 (45.5%) disagreed that tourism has increased the crime rate in Lalibela town and reasonable number of respondents 41

(37.3%) also agreed for the question tourism has increased the crime rate in Lalibela town. Furthermore, regarding the impact of tourism such as addictions; the majority of respondents 70 (63.6) agreed and 27 (24.3%) disagree for the question “tourism has increased the level of commercialization of the culture in Lalibela town”. However, as we can see from Table 5 increasing the flow of visitors in the town has its own positive impact in



**Table 5.** The response of visitors in activities related to visitor management issues and levels of satisfaction in RHCL.

visitor management issues and levels of satisfaction in RHCL	Very dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral		Satisfied		Very satisfied	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Strict enforcement of rules concerning improper conduct or behavior	19	10.7	9	5.1	58	32.6	52	29.2	40	22.5
The number of local guides are sufficient	7	3.9	8	5.1	46	25.8	45	25.3	71	39.9
Adequate safety and security provided in the churches	17	9.6	8	4.5	26	14.6	59	33.1	68	38.2
Sufficient hotel and accommodation services	10	5.6	16	9.0	34	19.1	69	38.8	49	27.5
Cleanness and hygiene of the churches	32	18	58	32.6	33	18.5	30	16.9	25	14
The signs to various parts of the church were easy to see	21	11.8	23	12.9	54	30.3	62	34.8	18	10.1
The story board and guide books about the church were available and clear	49	27.5	41	23.0	32	18.0	36	20.2	20	11.2
The number of public restrooms was adequate	66	37.1	46	25.8	45	25.3	14	7.9	7	3.9
Public restrooms were clean	50	28.1	47	26.4	57	32.0	20	11.2	4	2.2
The number of trash bins in and around the church was adequate	38	21.3	51	28.7	51	28.7	31	17.4	7	3.9
Paintings, artifacts and other heritages inside the church are well preserved	12	6.7	35	19.7	52	29.2	46	25.8	33	18.5
Tour guides had sufficient knowledge about the church	19	10.7	3	1.7	41	23.0	47	26.4	68	38.2
Local residents are friendly towards visitors	9	5.1	17	9.6	32	18.0	65	36.5	55	30.9
The trip to the rock-hewn church of Lalibela has increased my knowledge about the church	12	6.7	4	2.2	13	7.3	47	26.4	102	57.3
Hotels and lodging places are comfortable and attractive to visitors	14	7.9	13	7.3	42	23.6	64	36.0	45	25.3
Transportation access to the church is convenient.	12	6.7	17	9.6	45	25.3	68	38.2	36	20.2
My visit to the rock-hewn church of Lalibela has met my expectations	8	4.5	2	1.1	19	10.7	72	40.4	77	43.3

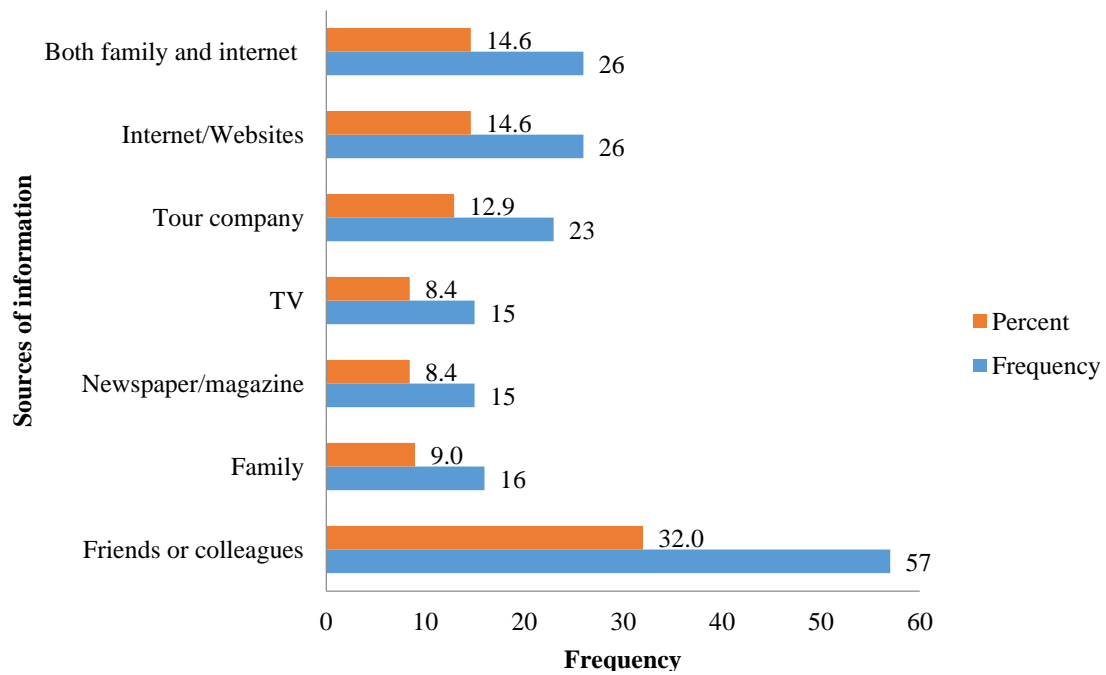
Source: Own data (2019).

generating income, job opportunity, increasing language skills; adverse practices seemed to be a serious negative influence of tourism in Lalibela town as the majority of respondents claimed that tourism had brought adverse practices to the town in terms of increasing the cost of living, crowdedness, developing dependency relationship, begging and commercialization of the culture in Lalibela town are among the major negative impacts of tourism.

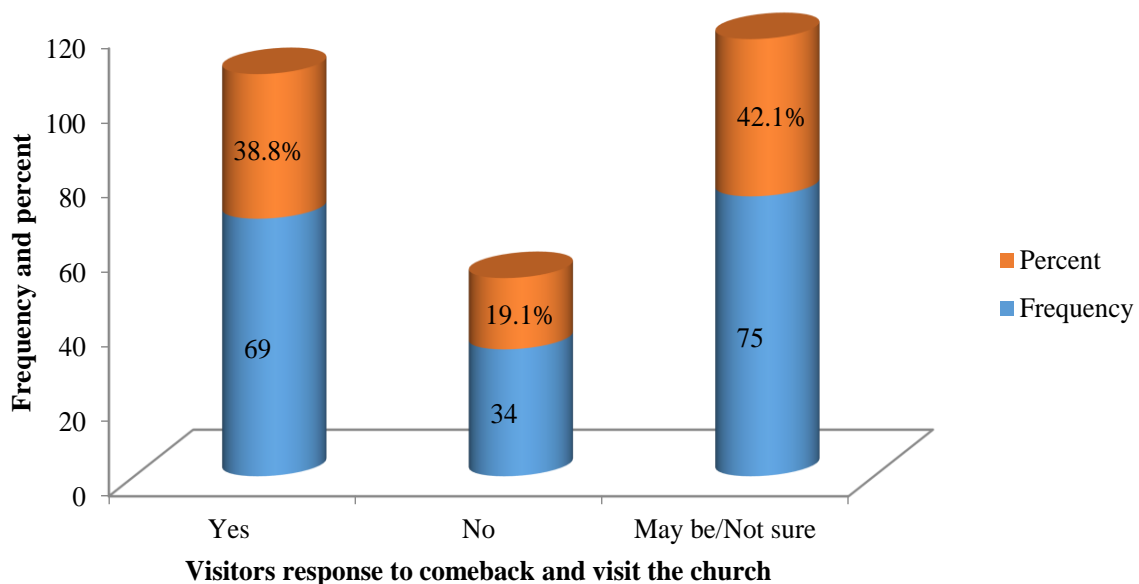
### Visitors perception on RHCL

In this research, visitors stated their overall impressions about the rock-hewn churches as well as their levels of satisfaction while they are visiting the RHCL. Most of their positive impressions were focused on the features of the churches. Around 87.6% of the respondents were their first trip to visit the RHCL. The majority of the respondents came to Lalibela mainly to visit the

rock-hewn churches after they got information from different sources. Accordingly, among the total respondents 57 (32%) were mainly from their friends and colleagues, 26 (14.6%) from internet and websites, 23 (12.9%) from tour company and the reasonable numbers of respondents also used their family, TV and newspaper/magazines (Figure 4) as a source of information. As a result, 75 (42.1%) of the respondents were not sure to come back again to visit the church and 69 (38.8%) of



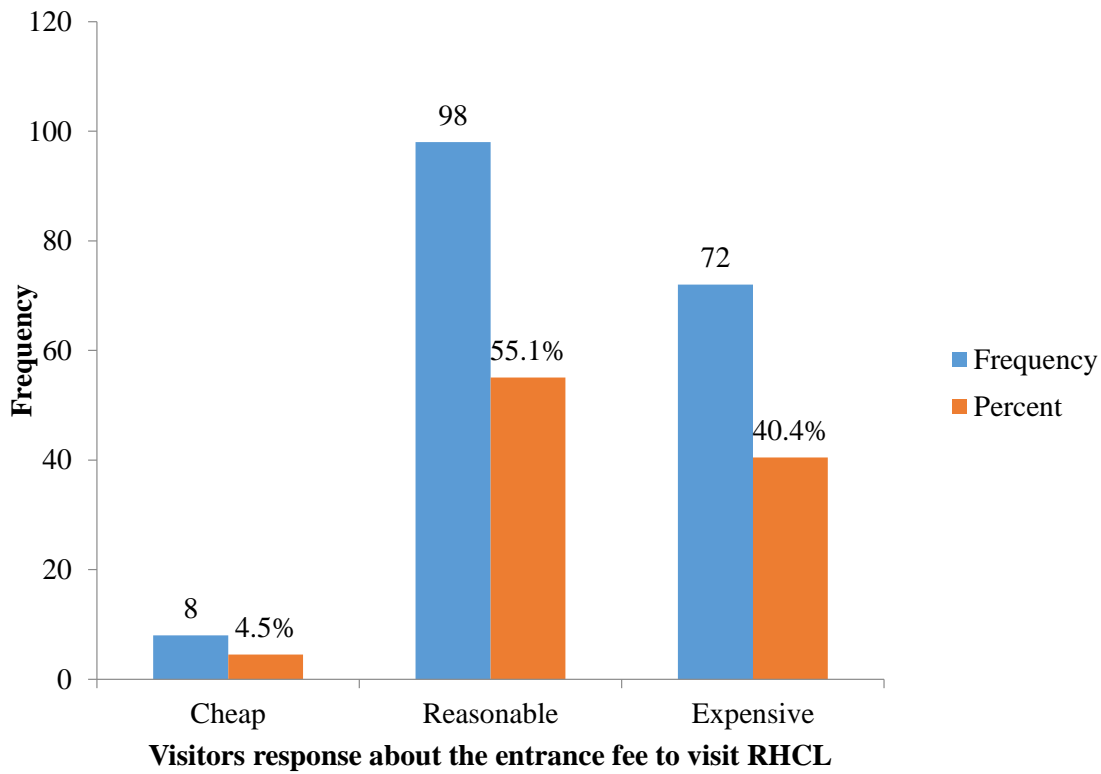
**Figure 4.** Summary for visitor's source of information to visit RHC.  
**Source:** Computed by the author.



**Figure 5.** Summary of visitor's response to comeback and visit the church  
**Source:** Computed by the author.

sample respondents are willing to visit the church again (Figure 5). This is because the destination site or RHCL is a cultural heritage so that the majority of visitors are

highly interested to visit other tourism sites and they are showing a keen interest to experience other cultures. Regarding the entrance fee, 98 (55.1%) of the sample



**Figure 6.** Summary of visitor's response about the entrance fee to visit RHCL  
Source: Computed by the author.

respondents regarded it as reasonable and 72 (40.4%) of sample respondents considered it as expensive (Figure 6). According to the church administration ticket office information, currently the entrance fee per overseas tourist is around \$50.

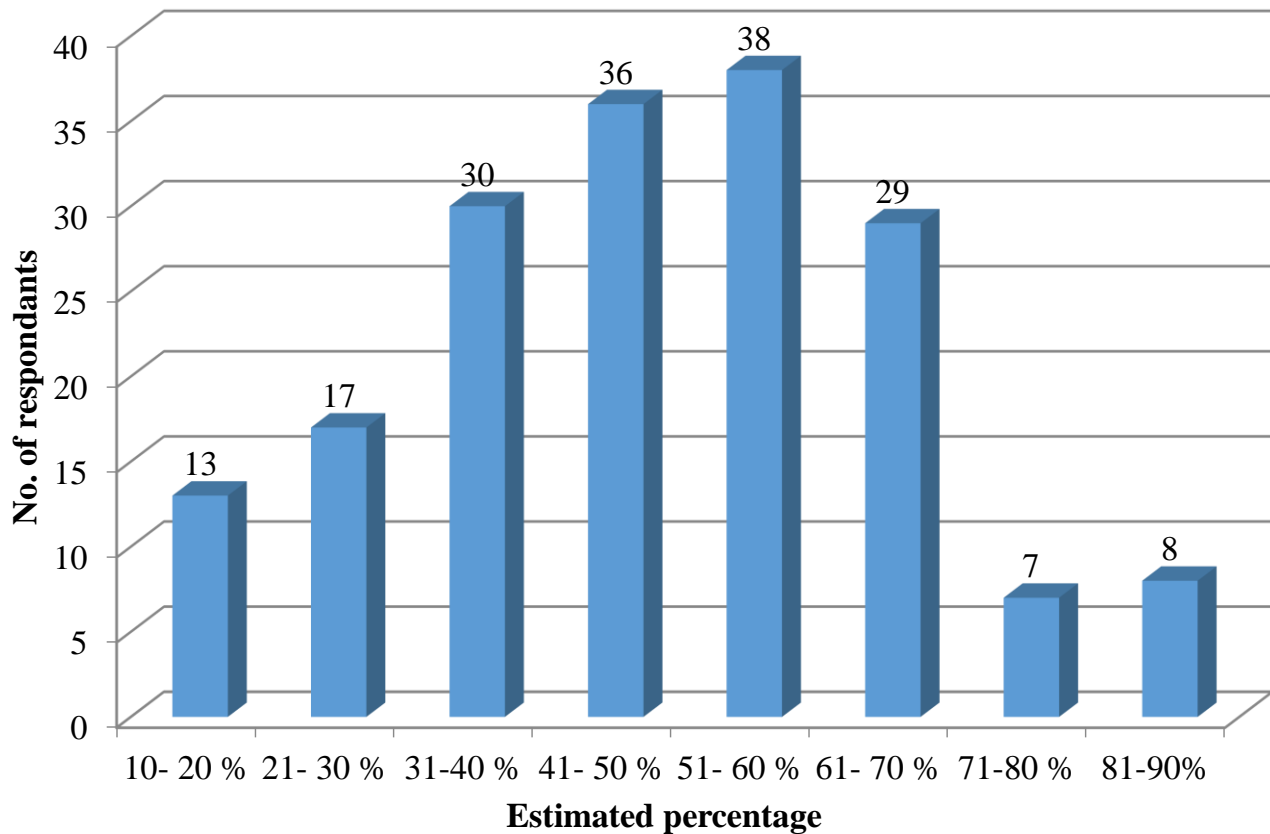
In this research, visitors were also asked about their best guess of the percent chance that the state of degradation or cracking of the RHCL within the next ten years. Figure 7 summarizes the finding by which the majority of visitors 103 (58%) were estimated the state of degradation of the RHCL within the next ten years might be between 41-70%. In addition, the reasonable numbers of visitors also estimated the state of degradation might be 10-40% and 15 (8%) of visitors guess the state of degradation might be between 71-90%. Therefore, according to this research finding, Rock Hewn Churches of Lalibela needs immediate conservation and maintenance practices for sustaining tourism development.

#### **Level of satisfaction**

As it can be inferred from the visitors point of view, out of

the total sample respondents, 92 (51%) respondents are satisfied about the strict enforcement of rules concerning improper conduct or behavior while they are visiting the church, 116 (65.2 %) respondents (45 satisfied and 71 very satisfied) that the number of local guides are sufficient and they are active and fast mover to explain about the historical background of church, 127 (71.3%) of the respondents (59 satisfied and 68 very satisfied) about the availability of adequate safety and security service provided in the churches. With respect to the sufficient hotel and accommodation services, 118 (66.3%) respondents satisfied (69 satisfied and 49 very satisfied) whereas 90 (50.6%) dissatisfied (32 very dissatisfied and 58 dissatisfied) and 34 (19.1%) neutral. However, the hotels and lodges are comfortable and attractive to visitors, the hotel and lodge owners have to deliver quality service to the visitors. Furthermore, 90 (50.5%) respondents (49 very dissatisfied and 41 dissatisfied) that the story board and guide books about the church were available and clear, 112 (62.9%) respondents (66 very dissatisfied and 46 dissatisfied) on the number of public restrooms was adequate and clean.

It can also been seen that 115 (64.6%) respondents were satisfied and 22 (12.4%) respondents were



**Figure 7.** Visitors prediction for the percent chance that the state of degradation of the RHCL within the next ten years.  
**Source:** Computed by the author.

dissatisfied that the tour guides had sufficient knowledge about the church. 120 (67.4%) respondents satisfied (65 satisfied and 55 very satisfied) about the hospitality of the local communities and the local residents are friendly towards visitors. Additionally, regarding the transportation access to the church 104 (58.4%) respondents satisfied (68 satisfied and 36 very satisfied) by which the facilities to the churches are convenient (Table 6). Moreover, the research result reveals that there is a gap in some facilities such as cleanliness and hygienic practices, public restrooms, paintings, artifacts and other heritages inside the church are among the services and facilities by which the majority visitors were not yet satisfied (Figure 7). Unlike this, strict enforcement of rules concerning improper conduct or behavior in the church, sufficient hotel and accommodation services, tour guides sufficient knowledge about the church, hospitality of local residents, attractiveness of hotels and lodges, transportation access to the church are among the services and facilities issues by which the majority of respondents 149 (83.7%) visit to the rock-hewn church of Lalibela has meet their expectations.

**Issues on tourism and heritage management**

***Tourism impacts in Lalibela***

Lalibela is one of the well-known touristic sites in Ethiopia. It is usually identified with the rock hewn churches in the town. The rock hewn churches of Lalibela are among the nine tangible sites in Ethiopia registered in the world heritage list. They are also unofficially considered as one of the eight wonders of the world. As per the interview and observation result of this study, both positive and negative impact of tourism has been seen in Lalibela. Tourism has created new job opportunity according to some sources; about 12% of the local population is believed to benefit from tourism, directly or indirectly (Mengistu, 2012). Local guides, hotel and lodge owners, souvenir shop owners, mule owners and priests at large are among the beneficiaries.

Visitors have influenced a certain extent with many youngsters way of dressing and consumption patterns. There is a desire for products used by the tourists. Tourism has resulted in the broadening of outlook on the

**Table 6.** A summary of observation checklist results on the conservation, accessibility and facility issues of RHCL.

Name of the Church	Conservation Issues		Accessibility and facility issues						Remark
	Level of physical damage	Needs of conservation and renovation	Cleanliness of the church	Locations information (Sign boards)	Lighting system	Safety and security	Toilet service	Health services (First Aid Service)	
Bete Medhanealem	High (3rd)	Conservation and renovation	Medium	Medium	Poor	Medium	Very poor	Very poor	Cracking the roof and external parts of the building
Bete Mariam	High	Conservation and renovation	Medium	Medium	Poor	Medium	Very poor	Very poor	Mural painting and the shelter load
Bete Meskel	High	Conservation and renovation	Medium	Medium	Poor	Medium	Very poor	Very poor	Deterioration
Bete Denagel	High	Conservation and renovation	Medium	Medium	Poor	Medium	Very poor	Very poor	Deterioration
Bete Debre Sinai	High	Conservation and renovation	Medium	Medium	Poor	Medium	Very poor	Very poor	Deterioration
Bete Gologotha	High	Conservation and renovation	Medium	Medium	Poor	Medium	Very poor	Very poor	Deterioration
Bete Gebriel	Medium	Conservation	Medium	Medium	Poor	Medium	Very poor	Very poor	Deterioration
Bete Merkorios	High (4th)	Conservation and renovation	Medium	Medium	Poor	Medium	Very poor	Very poor	Cracking the roof and external parts of the building
Bete Amanuel	Very high (1st)	Conservation and renovation	Medium	Medium	Poor	Medium	Very poor	Very poor	Top of the roof cracking
Bete Abba Libanos	Very high (2nd)	Conservation and renovation	Medium	Medium	Poor	Medium	Very poor	Very poor	The pillars
Bete Giorgis	High (5th)	Conservation and renovation	Medium	Medium	Poor	Medium	Very poor	Very poor	Biological factors and cracking in the corner sides

The information stated in this table is only from the authors' observation at the time of data collection. So there is nothing criteria or standard used for ranking the churches

world, and in the adoption of some western values. Many children and youngsters have gotten the chances to learn and speak foreign languages without any expense, especially English. It is because of tourism that Lalibela has gotten some of the indispensable facilities such as the airport,

banking, health service, telephone service, electricity and water supplies and other infrastructure facilities prior too many other towns in Ethiopia. Increased global awareness resulting from tourism has encouraged international organization such as UNESCO and European

Union (EU) to give due attention to and finance conservation works on the church.

Generally the research finding states that, both local community respondents are happy with the visitors who come to their own locality because tourism and has built the country image, maximize

the national revenue, foreign exchange, employment opportunity, create additional income for local community and co-relationship, integrity of cultural belief and behavioral changes. According to the interviewees and local community respondents' points of view, despite its importance, tourism in Lalibela has also resulted in some negative impacts. It has brought certain kinds of negative behavior such as alcoholism and taking drugs etc, up on the younger generation native cultures, the traditional way of life and spiritual value have declined and have been surpassed by alien touristic features. The interviewees also explained that, the cultural as well as the natural physical environment is degrading and there is also a loss of religious objects because of theft and illicit trafficking. Additionally, a great rural-urban migration towards Lalibela is taking place, which resulted in congestion and many unplanned settlement in the town, increasing the cost of living of the town, social crowdedness, developing dependency relationship with visitors, increasing crime and illegal acts in the town are among the most serious negative impacts of tourism in Lalibela.

### ***Threats facing the Rock Hewn Churches of Lalibela***

According to the research result, currently there are number of factors which lead to physical deterioration of RHCL. In this regard, identifying the nature and scale of destructive forces helps determine intervention methods. It also enables them to take measures before it results in total loss of heritages. Thus, the geography where the churches are located, without doubt, helped preservation of the churches. The churches that better survived the destructive forces of nature and human intervention are those built in caves. The RHCL have survived more than 850 years to date. However, today, they are increasingly collapsing. Both manmade and natural climate are responsible for the decay and deterioration of those irreplaceable treasures (Mengistu, 2012). One of the church administration interviewee elucidated that, the churches beauty and originality is generally decreasing at alarming rate. Hence, as per the filed observation and interview results, the researcher has also identified different challenges facing RHCL in different categories. Some of the major deterioration factors are explained below. Currently, RHCL are facing series challenges due to geological, climatic, natural disasters, biological and man-made (human) factors (Mengistu, 2012; Darbyshire et al., 2003; UNESCO, 1995; Butzer, 1982).

As per the local community's response, agents of deterioration caused by human intervention are very large in number and very dangerous. Many of the problems are related with urbanization. The explosive population growth in Lalibela has resulted in the

emergency of dense settlements near the churches, which has created tension. Continues human occupation and settlement has exposed the site to erosion and environmental degradation. Problems of sanitation and lack of sufficient space for a cemetery, lack of latrines and sanitary infrastructure, limited safe water supply, absence of drainage and waste disposal systems are among the very urgent identified urban problems in Lalibela town. Among the RHCL problems associated with sanitation have largely reduced the aesthetics of the site. For instance, it is very disgracing that visitors of Bete Giorgis should pass along a public toilet constructed adjacent to the church. The clergy man respondent's emphasizes that, the current use of artificial sound system (Loudspeakers) and traffic vibrations have brought harmful tensions on the churches. Additionally, the nearby noisy street mill is the major causes that accelerate internal decay and aging process of the monuments. The electric light is also another identified factor that creates series damage on the ecclesiastical objects. It has caused color fading and deterioration in the material from which the sacred objects are made. Neglect and ignorance are most likely among the major causes for heritage deterioration in Lalibela. For instance, some of *tukuls* are not in a good condition. Some of these traditional houses within the church compound are abandoned. This caused the house to deteriorate overtime, due to lack of maintenance. Furthermore, a primitive way of handling the heritage is also another major factor responsible for the damage to many religious objects. Many treasures are confined in to a very narrow space, some hanging on dirty wall and another lying on dusty floors. It is also because of such kind of backward handling systems that many objects are destroyed by humidity, bats and termites. Unwise conservation resulting from unnecessary human intervention has become the most distractive element of rock churches. Because of unwise conservation, some churches of Lalibela have lost their aesthetic and original character.

### **The current status of RHCL**

According to the observation checklist result and interviewee's response, the researcher has identified the current status of RHCL in terms of physical damage, accessibility and facility issues as follows. As described in Table 6, Bete Amanuel, Bete Abba Libanos, Bete Medhanealem, Bete Merkorios, Bete Giorgis are highly endangered in the parts such as roof, pillars and exterior parts cracking due to the newly constructed shelter load. The aforementioned problems facing the RHCL are due to geological, climate and biological factors. The other groups of RHCL are also in trouble and facing different challenges because of the age of churches, shelter load,

and other climate factors. Therefore, it is recommended that needs for conservation and renovation practices are mandatory to extend the shelf life of the churches and its religious aspect. The conservation practices should be conducted by participate the local communities (indigenous peoples in the town), researchers, and any other expertise to perform effective conservation practice. The researcher has also observed that, the cleanliness of the church, locations information (sign boards) availability and safety and security issues for the whole groups of churches are at medium level in terms of quality and accessibility.

This indicates that, there are some administration problems to intensively work for cleaning the churches, to prepare clear and strong sign boards which can stay for a long, and securing the churches from any terrorist activities. Regarding the toilet and first aid service, there is nothing facility to visitors when they are visiting the RHCL. This problem is very serious and critical which are highly recommended by the visitor respondents. However, the church administration tries to construct toilets and shades for taking rest to visitors, the constructed buildings (toilets and shades) in all groups are not finished yet and they are not giving a service to visitors. This indicates that, the church administration should take immediate remedial action to finalize the buildings via some maintenance works to make them functional and so that they can deliver a service to visitors.

### **Future prospects of RHCL**

Tourism is the fastest growing sector of the industry. The tourism industry contributes to economic growth of many countries and is taken as an essential sector of business for the development of the country. Increased involvement of governmental and non-governmental organizations and individuals in the promotion of the cultural heritages is resulting observable improvements in the tourism sector.

Among different issues regarding the future perspectives of the RHCL, the following are the prioritized list: Researches which have increased in recent years are also promising in terms of their contribution in indicating the challenges and recommendations of possible solution for the sake of increasing the roles of cultural tourism to both socio-cultural and economic growth of the sector, increasing the flow of visitors and employment opportunity, conserving and maintaining the RHCL, awareness creation to the local community on how to use the cultural heritages and how to conserve the church without missing its cultural history and other importance's.

The role of researches also extends to promotion of

cultural heritages. In addition, currently the church is deteriorating and needs urgent conservation and maintenance works by responsible parties, attentions given to applied researches on rock hewn churches are promising and it obviously maximizing the quality in development of heritage and tourism management aspects by which the damaging factors can be easily solved. Furthermore, the tourism sector is given a higher priority by the governmental and none governmental funding organizations for the issues regarding conservation and maintenance practices which is implemented in cooperation with other relevant stakeholders. There are also numbers of rock churches surrounding RHCL with distance ranges from 6-60km and this can be promising for increasing the tourist flow so that the church and local communities can be benefited. Currently, based on the research findings both the government and funding organizations are highly working on the conservation of cultural heritage tourisms; there are a number of infrastructure development related activities implementing such as transportation facility, awareness creation, conservation issues, hotel service, training and capacity building programs, producing qualified and educated individuals in the tourism and hospitality sector, shopping center and other services are taking in to consideration.

This implies that the futurity of the RHCL and the communities could be bright and it is a huge advantage for sustaining the development of tourism sector in Ethiopia.

### **Conclusion**

The tourism industry plays multiple roles in the economy, socio-culture, and environment of different countries of the world. The most widely recognized outcomes of tourism include providing employment, incomes, taxes revenues and foreign exchange. In Ethiopia, the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela are one of the most visited attractions in the country.

Lalibela is a small mountain town located in the northern part of Ethiopia. The life of local community in Lalibela is related to the churches: physically the peoples live around them, economically the churches are the main sources of income, and spiritually the peoples belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church. Additionally the town is situated in having different churches in the surrounding which leads the rural communities benefitted in different socio-cultural and economic values.

The RHCL have survived more than 850 years to date. However, today, they are increasingly collapsing. Both manmade and natural climate are responsible for the decay and deterioration of those irreplaceable treasures. In addition the research results revealed that, the church

administration has a lot of challenges in related conservation and renovation practices of RHCL.

Among those the following has been identified as the major threats; unclear organizational structure for different duties and responsibilities, absence of recorded and maintained archive documents such as tourist flow information, previous research work, church background histories, administration staff profile and documents regarding previous conservation works which has been done by different donors, lack of integration and communication with the LTACTO, regional and federal tourism offices, UNESCO and other responsible parts and absences of organized promotion/campaign for conservation and maintenance practices.

Hence, Bete Amanuel, Bete Abba Libanos, Bete Medhanealem, Bete Merkorios, Bete Giorgis are highly endangered in the parts such as roof, pillars and exterior parts cracking and the newly constructed shelter load are the damaging factors. The aforementioned problems facing the RHCL are due to geological, climate and biological factors. The conservation practices should be conducted by participating the local communities, researchers, and any other expertise to perform effective conservation practice. In synopsis, the level of awareness of the local communities about the importance of sustainable tourism in Lalibela is very limited. Regarding the issues of conservation and renovation practices, there is nothing published and archived documents kept by the church administration. The integration of responsible parties for conserving and maintaining the RHCL is still at infancy level. Moreover, local communities such as clergy's, hotel and lodge owners, tourism experts and visitors has been recommended the responsible parties to work together in collaboration for solving the series current challenges and maintain the future perspectives of RHCL.

### **Recommendation**

Following the above discussion and conclusions of the main findings of this research, this section outlines main recommendations that could assist the concerned authorities in constructing a framework for developing Sustainable Cultural Heritage Tourism in the town of Lalibela.

Therefore, based on the data and results of this study the following points are recommended:

1) The overall historical backgrounds of the religious preview, the church admin staff profile, the economic values of the church, visitor flow information, conservation and renovation works done before and/or planned practices to be done should be recorded and archived by the church administration office and LTACTO in the

form of written documents to conserve for the next generation.

2) In order to sustain the religious worship the church admin should implement strict rules and regulations such as setting specific time limitation to visit the churches, use specific area to store the off visitor's luggage, so that the RHCL can be easily protected from any disturbances and interferences during the worship practices. In addition, setting strict enforcement to waste disposal practices to keep the churches cleaned.

3) In some parts of RHCL, the conservation and maintenance works used to sustain tourism practices lack adequacy in relation to the number of local community participants assigned and the practices were not quality in terms of input usage. So, the responsible parties of the church such as government organizations, local community, civil societies and development investors must work together to meet standards for conserving the church.

4) The responsible party should develop conducive, environment to visitors and local communities in terms of transportation facility, road infrastructure, public toilet, café and restaurant service quality according to the standard, cleanliness of the church area, modernizing waste disposal technique, safety and security issues.

5) The church administration, LTACTO, UNESCO and other parties should primarily focused on working collaboratively in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation activities for conservation and maintenance works for RHCL.

6) The concerned body of the government and other relevant stakeholders should rectify both internal and external challenges for the RHCL.

7) The importance of tourism investment in the areas of human resource development and training of local workers cannot be overlooked. Continuous development of skill enhances not only the heritage conservation and management issues, but also the quality of tourism services and the overall skills and capabilities of the local work force. To this end the following recommendations are forwarded: the ministry of education should take in to consideration to develop curriculums in regarding heritage conservation and maintenance works to support the tourism industry by producing educated personnel in the respected occupation.

8) Finally, the government should review and maintain the most feasible tourism policy especially for heritage conservation management which can make ingenuous contribution for the development of tourism sector in the country.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.



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