

COMMUNITY CULTURAL HERITAGE MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION OF SELECTED MEDIEVAL ROCK-HEWN CHURCHES OF LALIBELA, ETHIOPIA

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1. Introduction

A wide range of issues, and sometimes even criticisms, have been pointed out and debated regarding the question of cultural heritage management concerns in modern Africa. The fact that it is related to the weakness of national and regional heritage institutions [1-2], means that a significant share of World Heritage Sites in Africa is found under the list of world heritage in danger.

There are various studies and archaeological works concerning cultural heritage problems in Ethiopia in general and the Medieval Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela in particular. However, it is almost impossible to find a complete picture relating to the major causes of cultural heritage management problems of these churches. Only several scholars have focused on conservation project complications and the need for conservation with international support and local participation [3-5]. Likewise, UNESCO, ICOMOS, ICCROM, and an advisory board from the local authorities in 2018 identified priority conservation issues at the World Heritage Site of Lalibela [5].

The analysis of rock samples [6] and studies of the geological and geotechnical properties of the Medieval Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela [7-10], moreover, have been covered in several research cases. Rock-cut stratigraphy [11-14] has also been widely used and an evaluation of the Lalibela rock-cut churches [7, 15-19] has been made and examined. Hence, despite carrying out archaeological studies on the rock churches [20-27], no attempts to study the full scale of the work have been made to

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obtain a full picture, a required step for their correct management, protection, and preservation. As a result, this renowned UNESCO world heritage site needs urgent action, as the damage to the churches is becoming serious.

The findings regarding the management practices of the Lalibela religious sculptures have identified serious concerns for their protection, as well as the fact that these management practices require further investigation. Since 2007, international organizations like the World Heritage Fund (WHF), UNESCO, and European Union (EU) have funded projects for the construction of canopies to protect five churches from the external elements. Yet, after doing so, a new problem arose when water began to infiltrate through the built canopies and caused further damage.



Figure 1. A) A canopy installed at the church of Bete-Medhane-Alem; B) the Bete-Mariyam Church with canopy.

Such cultural heritage management concerns are the subject of widespread criticisms, both by the immediate stakeholders and the conservationists. On the one hand, temporary light canopies were built to protect five churches from external factors (Figures 1A and B show two examples). However, the seeping water contributed to weathering and erosion of the rocks, thereby causing surface damage to the structures of all the churches. Moreover, this high level of human intervention may have resulted in a greater risk of the installed roof canopies collapsing. For this reason, the local community and church representatives have expressed serious concerns.

On the other hand, the urban development plan itself has pointed out the importance of harmonizing development, so as not to put the values and properties of the world heritage site of Lalibela at risk. However, incompatible goals among heritage stakeholders, overpopulation, and poor sanitation within the core zone of the World Heritage Property in Lalibela town need to be comprehensively and systematically investigated. These are the issues the study intended to address. Hence, the objective was to critically explore the community cultural heritage management and protection measures adopted in selected medieval rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia.

2. Materials and methods

The study was conducted through the use of a qualitative exploratory research design with a field survey. This method was used to generate information regarding the current status of local community cultural heritage management and protection of the

selected Medieval Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia. With special emphasis, an in-depth investigation was made on two purposely selected churches as a case study. The two selected churches were Bete-Medhane-Alem (House of the savior of the World – with a temporary light canopy installed) (Figure 1), and Bete-Qeddus-Mercoreus (House of St. Mercoreus – without a temporary light canopy) and were chosen for comparative purposes. Data was collected from unstructured and follow up-interviews, as well as focus group discussions to explore the level of human intervention and heritage management practices.

The number of research samples was 195 (total number of interviews) and consisted of the local community, which included elders, priests, historians, conservators, travel agents, tour operator employees, and local authorities (heritage experts, heritage managers and consultants). The focus group discussion and follow-up interviews consisted of 24 and 51 individuals respectively, which enabled mixed-gender groups to add diversity to the discussion. This study is the result of field surveys carried out by the researcher. Interviews with the local community and local authorities were also conducted. Once collected, the unstructured text, audio, video, and image data, including interviews, focus group discussions and observation surveys were correlated, analyzed, and discussed.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Local community participation in cultural heritage management

The findings of the research prove that a local community sense of belonging to the Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela creates greater attachment through the involvement of the locals in cultural heritage management and protection work. Conversely, a process involving a bottom-up approach does not create participation to empower local communities and protect the cultural heritage in and around the town of Lalibela. This is because the government tries hard to retain a top-down approach.

The issue of participation is rooted in the relationship between the government and the local community. For example, the local community has little trust in the authority's decisions regarding the planning and management of cultural heritage. The effort to build a degree of trust between the government and the local community is essential to preserve cultural heritage. Yet participatory programs are, in practice, rhetoric rather than a meaningful social exchange. This is because there are no appropriate mechanisms in place to solicit public engagement effectively. At the same time, there should be debate about what constitutes meaningful participation in cultural heritage management. It is the absolute right of individuals to be involved in heritage management activities in certain ways. Local community participation, as an approach to empower local communities and protect cultural heritage, can be created in the bottom-up and top-down process [28]. This participatory approach is part of the process that could bring benefits to both government and the local community. However, the government retains its power of control only in a top-down process and local community involvement is only at the stage of public meetings.

The Author, however, argues that the local community's sense of belonging to the place creates a higher demand for managing the Lalibela World Heritage Site. The term 'collective memory' has become a powerful symbol and an indicator of the way of life of a society. It is reflected in the innovation and expression of identity through the col-

lective memories of the past. Overall, the respondent's survey results reveal that the local community and the government for the proper management and protection of cultural heritage have taken different measures. As a result, the effort of the local government concerning cultural heritage management is not commendable. Generally, the community attempts to gain as much power as possible to directly participate in any conservation work. However, once UNESCO inscribes the heritage, ownership is transferred from the locals to the wider community (i.e. international community), which means locals are deprived of participation in any conservation work without the official authorization of UNESCO, which is the limitation of getting heritage properties onto the list of World Heritage Sites (WHS).

Yet the local community is still invited to public discussions to provide support for the cultural heritage management activities of the Church (Figure 2); consequently, the local community continues to participate in regular activities of beautification, clean-up campaigns, and environmental protection programs (Figures 2A, B and C). In evaluating the current situation of the WHS of the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, it is clear that the structures are suffering from continuous threats. These threats can be divided into two main categories. First of all, general threats, which all the sites are facing, are related to the aging and erosion of the rock-cut churches, resulting in cracks. This process is supported by weathering agents such as water, acids, salts, plants, and temperature changes. Secondly, the threats are related to the weakness of national and regional heritage institutions' management techniques to conserve and maintain their long-term value.

These threats, such as the aging of the rock-cut churches, can also be categorized as high-risk threats. Medium-risk threats include management deficiencies in the heritage institutions and low-risk threats are called common threats, such as shortcomings in the legal framework and trained human resources. For example, the external wall of Bete-Medhane-Alem church started to deteriorate and then extended to other areas, a process which accelerated when water began to infiltrate through parts of the cracked rock structures.

The findings have clarified that implementing the management plan for this heritage site is limited. The situation points to most of the existing management plans being only 'paper plans' without any effective consequent action; the plans do not even follow the time-period. Hence, there is a necessity to conduct new approaches, partic-



Figure 2. A) Local community involvement in a beautification project; B) cleaning decoration on the outside; C) conserving a damaged part of the heritage.

ularly for community-based cultural heritage resource management. Even though the Churches of Lalibela have continued to generate new and creative community businesses as a source of income to support the ongoing management of heritage, conservation activities have failed to receive more attention and resources. The results from questionnaire variables exemplified that local community participation in effective cultural heritage management and protection is limited.

3.2. Government efforts in cultural heritage management

Lalibela's churches are used by locals daily. The spiritual and religious festivals throughout the year are long-standing traditions of community engagement with the churches. However, with a large number of pilgrims, particularly in January, two issues of concern arise: maintaining the intangible religious activities and preserving the physical existence of the cultural heritage without negative consequences. Today the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church is still a central element in the daily lives of the Lalibela community. Both the Church and government exert influence in decisions made in the town, which also includes the management of the WHS of Lalibela [29]. The local administration is still working on achieving a partnership between the Ministry, investors, and non-governmental organizations in each management area which involves many tasks, such as developing programs, funding, and implementing projects. This is necessary to gain public support for local administration efforts and to encourage individuals to participate in these attempts. Developing a training program to create a distinguished group of site managers is also part of the semi-centralized monitoring structure. The Ethiopian Orthodox-Tewahedo Church is a symbol of devotion to God. It is the legal owner of the churches and acts as a traditional custodianship, which is a subset of the traditional heritage management system; the church has a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and beliefs.

On the one hand, the government acts as a decision-maker in all matters related to enacting laws that promote and encourage the management of the sites and monuments that are deemed to help current and future generations to understand the histories of the local, state, or territorial, and federal environments. On the other hand, Ethiopian Orthodox Church actions are guided by customs and belief systems, carried out by local communities, and aimed at the continuous use and preservation of the place, its values, and its surrounding environment. Heritage law ignores the fact that communities operating within traditional custodianship systems can manage their heritage on behalf of the state. Thus far, it has been concluded that the management system in the town of Lalibela is experiencing challenges in facilitating the protection of cultural heritage. As mentioned earlier, the issues of concern relate to matters largely in extensive heritage controls, legal restrictions, and the unrestricted powers of several stakeholders in the heritage administrative system. Ignoring church participation within traditional custodianship systems reinforces the perception that the church administration does not form part of heritage management work.

Yet again, as identified in the discussion above, the heritage management system has been unable to protect heritage sites from falling victim to destruction by neglect. The key, then, is to explore stakeholder perceptions on key factors driving the decision-making process and a common understanding and ongoing development of new approaches for the collective heritage management system. From the local community, a historian argued that, for some, it means protecting the traditional knowledge and

memories that gave life to cultural landscapes, such as artefacts and churches left behind by ancestors. For others, it means making sure that cultural heritage provides an understanding of cultures and environments for the present generation. In the town of Lalibela, heritage is considered evidence of past human activities in the present.

3.3. Community cultural heritage management practices

For many years, the Lalibela Churches, as a cultural antiquity, have survived to this day. The rocks from which the churches were excavated are exposed to natural hazards such as earthquakes and floods. There are different factors responsible for the deterioration of cultural heritage such as climatic causes, natural disasters, and biological and botanical causes. Destructive anthropogenic causes can include illicit trafficking, intervention, conflict and war, pollution, and mass tourism [30-36]. While the degree and nature of these causes vary, the cultural heritage of Lalibela Churches has been affected by all these factors.

Based on this, an attempt has been made to explore the community's view of heritage management and protection work. Experts often emphasize only the economic importance of cultural heritage, so its spiritual and aesthetic value is of secondary importance. This situation has been caused by a limited understanding of the importance of the historic fabric and the oversimplification of values due to the divergence of interests in the heritage sector.

The Cultural Policy of Ethiopia (1997) provides a set of fundamental principles intended to guide the identification, management, development, and promotion of cultural heritage. Certainly, community involvement is expected to create sustainable community-based heritage management and provide equality in the distribution of the benefits to the local community and authorities. On the one hand, this indicates any direct role of local community involvement is due to existing economic opportunities. On the other hand, the local community views cultural heritage sites as a legacy for contemporary communities. Their perceptions tend to extend beyond those of the central government or the private sector's economic motives. However, for the majority of local community members, the income accrued from cultural heritage is enough to make a living.

It is worth noting that the local communities are the closest owners, custodians, and protectors of Lalibela cultural heritage. Up to this day, the transfer of various antiquities from generation to generation is largely made by the custodian efforts of local communities. The preservation of these churches over the past centuries has been guided by local communities who have saved these ancient structures for the future. However, most modern interventions have failed to restore the original features of the rock-cut churches.

At the same time, while observing the diversity of the stakeholders interested in the heritage management of the Lalibela Churches, there are incompatible goals among them. The participatory approach dominates the discourse on management and, more often than not, it becomes mere political correctness instead of tangible action. The multiplicity of actors involved in heritage management with the Lalibela Churches creates incompatible goals among the heritage stakeholders.

An elder, who was part of the research survey, was asked if they had a clear understanding of the interaction between heritage stakeholders and the WHS of Lalibela. He said that the community and the seasonal pilgrims were the core stakeholders who shared the same values and religious beliefs. Currently, particular churches are man-

aged by the community by recruiting trainees among the locals for regular follow-ups and requests for maintenance programs. However, there are different areas of cooperation and involvement where heritage stakeholders are required. For example, heritage stakeholders need to have shared goals to ensure the viability, preservation, protection and promotion of cultural heritage.

There are different stakeholders' perceptions regarding cultural heritage management and protection work. For this reason, the Burra Charter establishes principles for the effective management and conservation of cultural heritage sites. The charter stresses that stakeholders from all disciplines in the heritage sector are needed to contribute to the safeguarding of cultural heritage for present and future generations.

3.4. Bete-Medhane-Alem Church and Bete-Qeddus-Mercoreus Church

The House of the Savior of the World or Bete-Medhane-Alem is the largest church of all and stands out due to its size. The large numbers of pillars of the church are considered pillars of great mystery. There are 72 pillars symbolizing the 72 disciples (34 inside and 38 outside) as shown in Figure 3A. The church is 11m high, 34m wide and 24m long.

The Church of Bete-Mercoreus (House of Mercoreus) is situated on the opposite side of the encircling mountain of Bete-Emanuel and is Emperor Lalibela's seventh work. It is irregular in shape and is one of the four churches from the southeast group of churches (Figure 3B). The church is surrounded by tall rectangular supporting pillars and has regularly shaped openings in the form of a cross. Local communities believe that Christ touched one of the pillars of the Church when he revealed himself to Emperor Lalibela in his dreams.



Figure 3. A) Bete-Medhane-Alem (House of the Savior of the World); B) Bete-Qeddus-Mercoreus (House of St. Mercoreos) Church.

The Church of Bete-Medehane-Alem (House of the Savior of the World) is a huge pink stone structure that was sculpted from the top down atop a rock cliff. It is the second work by Emperor Lalibela among the eleven churches and the widest and biggest of them all. Due to rainfall most of the roof is in a state of deterioration with poor conservation action [37]. Some of the pillars of Bete-Medehane-Alem church have been

rebuilt upon the original foundations after being damaged. The damaged pillars had to be rebuilt to protect those that were still standing. The external wall of the church also shows signs of deterioration, which is extending in different directions, a process which accelerated when water began to infiltrate through the built protective shades and resulted in further damage. In addition, one of the collapsed columns can still be seen abandoned, in a state of disrepair, at the north-western corner. There is a long crack inside the two church arcades. Inside the church, the walls are deteriorating due to water infiltration from the roof. The upper-row windows have round arches supported by brackets; the arches have ten small circular openings.

It has three doors, on the north, south, and east sides, respectively. The main entrance is in the center of the church. From this western door, a staircase leads to the narthex. The interior of the church is large, its size and plan creating the atmosphere of a cathedral. The interior walls are without decoration, but they are impressive. It has a nave, five aisles, and eight bays separated by 38 columns. The first bay on the western side makes up a narthex and the last two bays on the eastern side lead up to the Meqdes (sanctuary), accessible only to priests and deacons. The aisles have flat ceilings, while the nave has a barrel vault. The interior of the church is dominated by four rows of rectangular pillars, which support the nave and aisles. Unlike the exterior, the interior pillars are ornamented with bracket capitals, and are linked to each other by semi-circular arches.

The level of damage within the church is less compared to the exterior wall. In the north-eastern corner of the interior, there are three empty graves (tombs), and according to the church priest, the three empty graves symbolically represent those of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Three unique features distinguish the church: its huge and impressive size, the large number of pillars, both inside and outside, and the plan of the five passageways.

The Bete-Qeddus-Mercoreus (House of St. Mercoreus) church is irregular in shape and is one of the four churches from the southeast group. The church is composed of chambers supported by pillars. The exterior walls are decorated with different rows of windows. The windows in the lower row are rectangular and filled with panels of pierced stone, each of which is ornamented with a central cross. As explained by the church priests, this particular church is still the most devastated in the southeast group and stands without any protective measures. The roof of the church is exposed to different weather conditions, consequently, rainwater continues to infiltrate, a situation which might alter the church structure, considering it is an underground rock-cut monolithic church. Local people further explain that the church is dedicated to a Roman martyr, St. Mercoreus, which recalls the contacts early Christian Ethiopia had with the Roman Empire.

There are many passageways to this particular church and one subterranean flat dark hidden underground passage traditionally symbolizes hell. Likewise, the church itself symbolizes heaven. What is peculiar to this church is its monolithic altar, carved from the parent stone under it, with eight hewn pillars. The level of structural damage can be observed easily, and it is one of the most damaged and partially collapsed churches among the rock-hewn structures.

So far, it stands without any protective roof, and it has not undergone any preservation work. As a result of the partially collapsed structure, the church was unable to teach biblical doctrine for more than a decade to believers. The collapsed part of this church was repaired in the 1960s by an Italian conservationist called Angelini. It was then repaired again by local custodians in 1989. Since then, it has been used as a centre for worship.

4. Conclusion

For a long period, the local communities took full responsibility for protecting and preserving its cultural heritage. However, the heritage site of Lalibela has suffered serious deterioration because of aging factors. Such factors may gradually lead to a total collapse of the entire structure. From the findings of this study, it is possible to conclude that specific conservation activities and intervention are important to improve management practices and modern conservation methods need to be adopted to stop further damage. The initiatives currently being taken by the government are, nevertheless, a positive sign to protect and preserve the cultural properties in Lalibela.

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Disclosure statement

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Summary

The Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela are tangible world heritage. However, the sculptures are facing imminent danger of destruction and damage from various factors of deterioration. This is because they have been affected by various agents which have caused rapid deterioration, as well as by the aging process. Geological factors can be related to the rock formations and fractured ceilings; climatic factors can be related to temperature fluctuations which gradually affect the condition of the cultural heritage; biological factors include bacteria and fungi which are also a threat to the sculptures. Hence, modern conservation methods are needed to halt further damage before facing the total collapse of the entire structure. Having described several elements of concern in the management of this World Heritage Site, this study suggests important considerations to put in place for developing proper approaches to its preservation.

Riassunto

Le chiese scavate nella roccia di Lalibela sono Patrimonio Mondiale dell'Umanità. Tuttavia, esse sono a rischio di distruzione e danneggiamento a causa di vari fattori di deterioramento. Questo perché sono soggette, oltre che al normale processo di invecchiamento, oltre che a vari agenti che ne hanno causato un rapido deterioramento: fattori geologici, correlati alle formazioni rocciose, che riguardano le fratture nei soffitti; fattori climatici, che riguardano le variazioni di temperatura e che influiscono gradualmente sulla conservazione del patrimonio culturale; fattori biologici fra i quali batteri e funghi che sono una minaccia per i beni. Pertanto, sono necessari idonei metodi di conservazione per arrestare l'ulteriore degrado e prevenire il crollo totale dell'intera struttura. Dopo aver descritto i diversi fattori di rischio per questo sito Patrimonio dell'Umanità, lo studio suggerisce azioni da mettere in pratica per sviluppare metodologie adeguate alla sua conservazione.