

# Cultural Heritage Management Practices- in the Medieval Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia——Survival of the Heritages and the Legacies it Contains

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## Abstract

In Ethiopia, cultural heritage management system is less effective to protect historical and archaeological sites. For many years, local communities start living in close proximity to heritage places and have often played a large role in ensuring the survival of places of cultural, historical and religious significance through their traditional custodianship systems. However, often these systems are ignored and not fully recognized. The paper attempt to examine the major result of the cultural heritage management practices on the survival of the Medieval Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela and the legacies it contains. Further, the paper recommends the adoption of a framework enriched by a philosophy to embraces legal pluralism in heritage legislation and cultural polices.

## Keywords

Cultural Heritage Management, Historical and Archaeological Sites, Heritage Values and Communities

## 1. Introduction

The evolution of culture and heritage has led to major theoretical and empirical debates in social science disciplines (Wyer et al., 2009; Graham and Howard, 2008; Ashworth et al., 2007; Miles and Kirkham, 2003). The study of cultural heritage management and conservation has received a great deal of attention in the social sciences because these terms are considered vital parts of what societies are, what they do and what they might become in the future.

Apart from tangible elements such as monuments and sites, cultural heritage encompasses ethical values, social customs, belief systems, religious ceremonies, and traditional knowledge systems of which intangible heritage is the sign and expression (UNESCO, 2003). Cultural heritage management is about “care and continuing development of a place such that its significance is retained and revealed and its future secured” (Ndoro, 2001). In Ethiopia, like in the rest of the world, the main issues that cultural heritage management strategies have tried to address over the past decades have been the protection of sites from natural and human damage. However, in ensuring the conservation and management of cultural heritage sites, the government has failed in integrating different management systems.

Management of cultural heritage sites has led to a conflict between local communities and heritage management institutions across the region (Pwiti and Mvenge, 1996; Taruvinga and Ngoro, 2004). The dilemma associated with managing such cultural heritage sites has been discussed from different perspectives by a number of scholars over the last decades (Maradze, 2003; Ngoro and Pwiti, 1999; Pwiti and Mvenge, 1996; Taruvinga, 1995).

Nevertheless, despite the growing awareness about the important role of local communities in the active use and management of cultural heritage sites, the government disregarded and overstays the urgency of cultural heritage management and conservation effort in Ethiopia. Yet, and there is little information about the cultural heritage management practices in Ethiopia in general and the Medieval Rock Hewn Churches of Lalibela in particular. The Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela were one of the first restoration projects sponsored by the World Monuments Fund (WMF) in the 1960s. Since then, many historic heritages and artistic qualities are often unwisely scarified because of unwarranted presumption. Consequently, many have been victimized to an entire replacement and others to partial damages.

Therefore, a wide range of criticism originated from the local community and often questions the urgency and necessity of the proper cultural heritage management work in the Medieval Rock Hewn Churches of Lalibela.

### 1.1 Contextualizing The Medieval Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia

Lalibela (ሉሊበሌ) is a small mountain town located in the northern high plateau of Ethiopia. It is situated on the side of a mountain in a scenic landscape characterized by a rocky topography at an altitude of over 2,600 meters between the peak of Abuna Yosef, which ends at nearly 4,200 meters above sea level and the plain of the Takazze River (ESTDP, 2009).

The heart of the town is a home of the eleven Medieval Rock Hewn churches and it is attributed to King Lalibela, who set out to excavate in the 12th century (Sergew, 1972; Tadesse, 1972). All the eleven churches represent a unique and superior craftsmanship and artistic works, in their execution from the rock of monolithic blocks and representation as a living cultural heritage. These blocks were further chiseled out, forming doors, windows, columns, various floors, roofs and the gigantic work was further completed with an extensive system of drainage ditches, trenches and ceremonial passages, some with openings to hermit caves and catacombs.

These exceptional churches have been the focus of Coptic Christians since the 12th century as a place of pilgrimage as it offers an exceptional testimony to the medieval and post-medieval civilization of Ethiopia (Mengistu, 2004; Philipson, 2005).

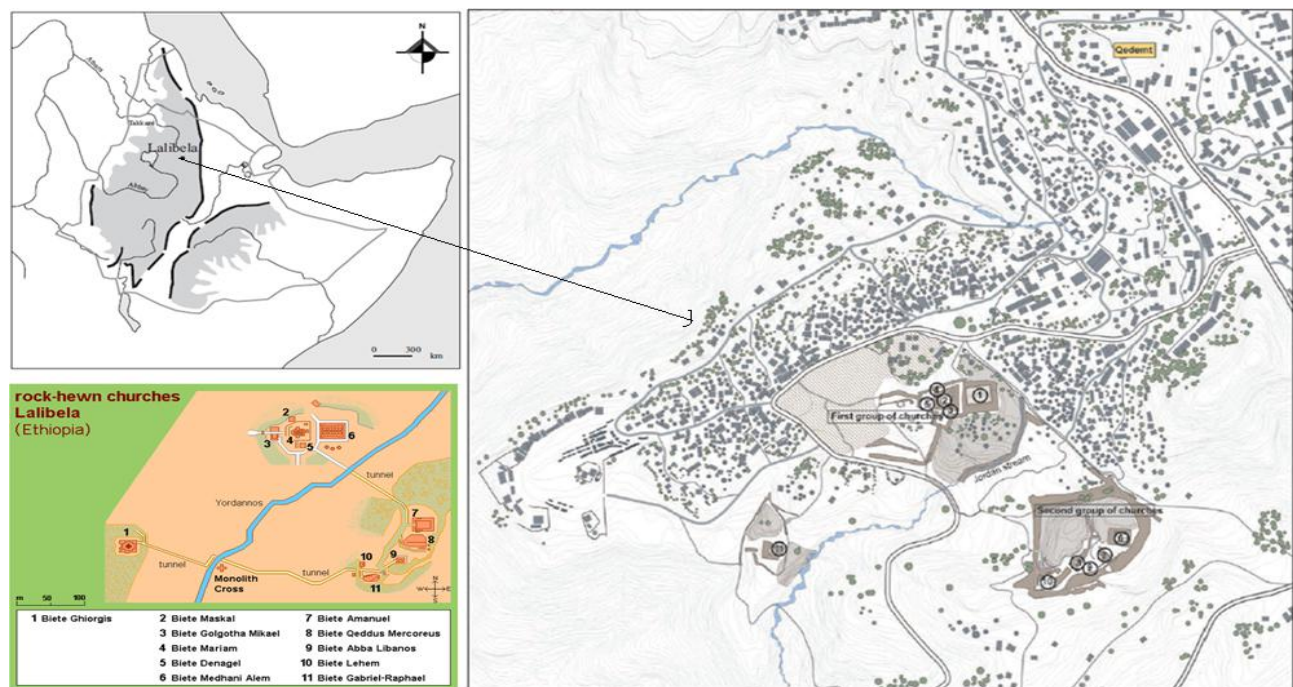


Figure 1: Map Showing Location of the Study Area and Topographic Map Showing Location of the Site in Lalibela



For centuries, in a long and successful presence, the Medieval Rock Hewn Church of Lalibela has been a home to priests and monks used for daily worship, receiving pilgrims and large crowds. However, the process of deterioration and serious degradation of this priceless cultural heritage is still a challenge for its integrity of the property.

For example, the drainage ditches were filled up with earth for several centuries and this has resulted in a severe degradation of the monuments from water damage, and most of them are now considered to be in a critical condition. Even the temporary light shelters keep rain off the churches they cover. These shelters address only one of the problems affecting the site damage caused by rainwater and with their massive steel frames, they are highly intrusive.

Then again, structural problems have been identified in temporary light-weight shelters and an imminent risk of collapse is possible, and other locations need to be monitored. Serious degradation of the paintings inside the churches has occurred over the last thirty years. Sculptures and bas-reliefs (such as at the entrance of Biet Mariam) have also been severely damaged, and their original features are hardly recognizable.



**Figure 2: Original Features are Severely Damaged and Hardly Recognizable in Biete Mariam (House of Mary) Church**

Other threats include encroachment on the environment of the churches by urbanization with a residential construction adjacent to the property and a buffer zone has not yet been provided. An additional problem has also been the harmonization of the different projects and effective coordination between the partners with working conservation and management plan. There is no special and legal framework except the general law, Proclamation No. 209/2000. For this reason, this area is selected for conducting a study that requires to ensuring exceptional cultural heritage management and conservation effort to save the deterioration of this priceless cultural heritage.



**Figure 3: Overpopulation, Poor Sanitation and Urbanization with a Residential Construction Adjacent to the World Heritage Sites**

In general, the scale of work required for its conservation reaches to its urgency and the conservation task should have to involve in preserving the cultural heritage. The vulnerability of the monuments needs to vast conservation, repair and preservation work of this cultural heritage as a legal protection and zoning.

## 2. Methodology

The general objective of the study is to critically evaluate the cultural heritage management practices in the Medieval Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela with a special emphasis on the temporary light shelter churches. Methods of data collection were also include primary data collection such as field visit through topographic survey, geophysical survey, virtual 3D scale models, mapping with the help of GIS and scale photographs. A collection of oral historical evidence and interviews (one-on-one or face-to-face, telephone, e-mail, and fax) in a non - intrusive method were audio-recorded and transcribed for further investigation with properly formulated samples of hundreds. Moreover, secondary data were collected from preexisting sources of academia and peer-reviewed literature in order to understand the academic discourse and theoretical foundations of the research topic.

## 3. Result and Discussions

### 3.1. Cultural Heritage Management Practices- In The Medieval Rock-Hewn Churches Of Lalibela

The eleven Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela contributed a lot in making the area known to the outside world and an important center of tourist destination. Considerable number of tourists, researchers and pilgrims set foot to the eleven Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela every year besides the Yimrehane Kirstos, Bilbala Giyorgis, Bilbala Kirkos, Arbatu Ensesa, Asheten Maryam, Neakuto La'ab and Genete Maryam in and around the town. Even though, there are number of accounts and archaeological works (Monti Della Corte, 1940; Buxton, 1947; Playne, 1954; Beckingham and Huntingford, 1961; Gerster, 1970; Mengistu, 2004; Phillipson, 2005; Abebe, 2010) especially on the rock churches, it is hardly possible to state they are studied in the way enable to give complete picture of rock churches in Lasta.

The Portuguese mission, which came to Ethiopia in 1520s, (Beckingham and Huntingford, 1961), was a great success in discovering and recording places which were not known to the outside world. Alvares provided a record, with enormous value, of the rock hewn churches hidden in Lasta. Further also pointed out number of problems of description of aspects related with architecture and other elements of these churches. No further accounts were prepared by foreigners for more than three centuries (Phillipson, 2005). Few of the visitors, who visited the area in the early 20th century, contributed much useful information on architecture of the churches.

According to Buxton (1947), during the Italian occupation, there were number of visitors to Lalibela, where some troops were stationed. But there are no recorded evidences of attempts made to conduct studies until 1939, when Monti Della Corte carried an archaeological survey there. Documents on rock churches of Lalibela by Monti Della Corte (1940) made important contributions for the archaeological works in the years followed. Plans by Monti Della Corte are still widely used in literatures. Findlay (1943) is another visitor who gave a brief description of the rock churches of Lalibela and some others in different parts of the country. He compiled a useful summary of information from the older records with descriptions of the churches (Buxton, 1947).

The works of Buxton since 1947 continued to be important reference in the study of rock churches of the country. The studies focus on description and discussion of architectural elements and general presentation of historical aspects. His investigations are mostly supported with ground plans and sometimes detailed section plans. Buxton and Matthews (1974) attempted to reconstruct two ancient Axumite buildings, served two different purposes. These were: one of the Pre-Christian palaces of Axum, the so-called Enda Mikael palace, and the great church of "St. Mary of Zion" (Buxton, 1986). The church of Tsion Maryam was reconstructed based on Alvares's reference of the church. Alvares stated that the church looks like that of Bete Medihani-alem, the largest church at Lalibela (Beckingham and Huntingford, 1961; Finneran, 2007).

As specified above that the Rock Hewn Church of Lalibela is discussed in different publications (Gerster, 1966 ; Gerster, 1970; Asfawossen, 2002; Buxton, 1971; Phillipson, 2005; Mengistu, 2011; Lindahl, 1970; Bidder, 1959; Mengistu, 2004), but there are no attempts made to study rock churches of Lasta collectively and it is still essential to consider studying the scale of work required for its management, protection and conservation practice.

Currently, there is a general recognition that the whole environment has been affected by its interaction with



humanity and is therefore capable of being recognized as heritage. The growing concept of heritage and the increased importance given to how heritage places relate to their surroundings mark an important shift in thinking. Inevitably, the concept of heritage is defined by the World Heritage Convention and recognizes that heritage can be monuments, groups of buildings and sites.

In Ethiopia, the Rock Hewn Church of Lalibela, being a living heritage, and 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). The process of deterioration of this priceless cultural heritage is the result of different internal and external factors.



**Figure 4: Crack on Bete Gabrel Roof (House of Gabriel Raphael) – Bete Medhane Alem (House of the Savior of the World)**

The Rock Hewn Church of Lalibela was one of the first restoration projects sponsored by the World Monuments Fund in the 1960s. Early interventions are considered to have damaged the structures with water infiltration and structural instability caused by cracks (Kidanemariam, 2016). Since then, the cultural heritage management and conservation practices show a negative balance to prevent irreversible damage and enormous loss of heritage resources.



**Figure 5: Angelini's Workers digging the trenches (Source: Angelinis Archives, World Monument Found)**

Currently, the intervention of different key actors for the management and conservation work of Rock Hewn Churches of Lalibela is passing through challenges and controversies. International organizations like World Monument Fund (WMF), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and European Union (EU) funded Shelter Project has been installed to protect five churches from water infiltration

through their roofs and further damage which currently led to controversy.



**Figure 6: Temporary Shelters Installed to Protect Five Churches from Water Infiltration**

Hence, the conservation works that were implemented in the Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela needs a critical survey of the consequences in light of the current problems of damage. Moreover, the local community and the representatives of the church have expressed their serious concerns about the temporary shelters and the possible impact of damage.

Further, this is thought to result in a high risk of collapse of the shelters and put the structures of the churches contrary to the intended protection in a serious danger. However, despite many reminders, there has been no regular and formal assessment or maintenance of the shelters.

Inversely, there is a question on the techniques of conservation that were used and difficulty in harmonization of different projects and the level of local community involvement in order to find out own ways of restoration work. At large, the scale of work required for its protection and conservation reaches to its urgency.

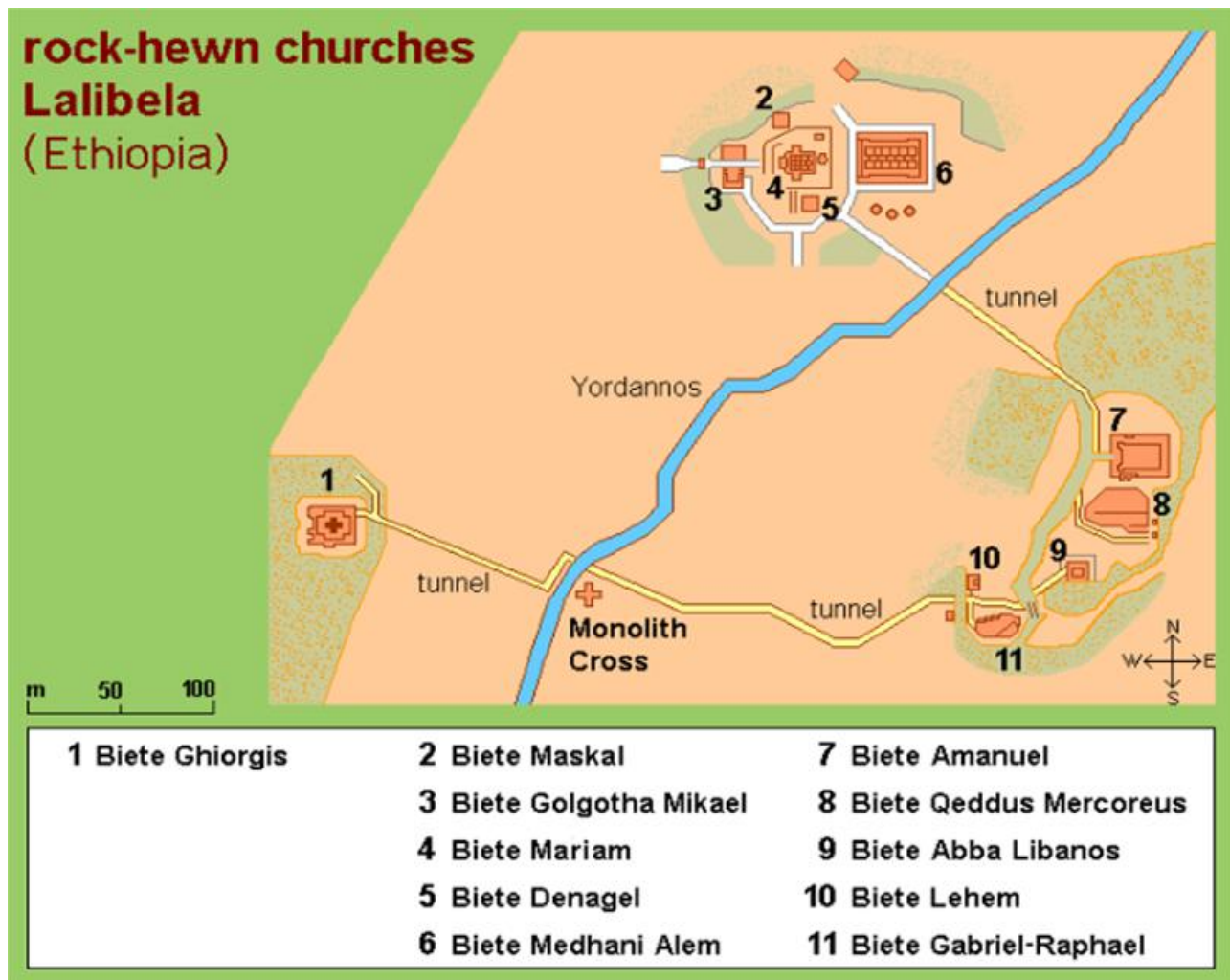
### **3.2 Cultural Heritage Management Practices- Survival of the Heritages and the Legacies it Contains**

The heritage conservation efforts in Ethiopia date back to the beginning of Orthodox Christianity as an official faith (Solomon, Tassie, and Tawab, 2010). Kings of the imperial regime also played a vital role in heritage conservation through the absence of an organized cultural institution in Ethiopia. It was during the mid-20th century under the last imperial regime (1930–1974) that the heritage conservation system was modernized and institutionalized. According to Mengistu (2004), the King built the Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela as a deliberate attempt to create a second holy land in Ethiopia and to discourage the journey of Ethiopian pilgrims to Jerusalem. The area is surrounded by high plateaus and by some of the highest mountains of Ethiopia.

Lalibela has always been a place of pilgrimage largely known in Ethiopia. An uninterrupted stream of worshipers has come and gone throughout the centuries (Batistoni, 2008). There are eleven churches in total, which are divided into three clusters separated by the Jordan River. The first group of six churches lies north of the Jordan, while the second group of four churches is located south of the Jordan River.

The third cluster contains only one giant monolithic rock-hewn church called Bete Giorgis, which is situated to the southwest of both the first and the second group of churches. Based on group of churches the 11 Rock-Hewn churches of Lalibela situated and divided in to three groups as of:

- 1) Northern group of churches (Biete Medhane Alem, Biete Maryam, Biete Mascal, Biete Denagel, Biete Golgotha Mikael)
- 2) Eastern group of churches (Biete Amanuel, Biete Mercurios, Biete Abba Libanos, Biete Gabriel Rafael, Biete Lehem) and
- 3) Western group of churches (Biete Ghiorgis and associated Holy Water fountain)



**Figure 7: Three Clusters of the Medieval Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela**

The Property was among the first twelve sites to be inscribed by UNESCO on the World Heritage List in 1978. In the early 20th century, restoration works took place during the 1920's, the 1950's, and the 1960's. The first restorations took place in the 1920's and from 1954 to 1959, which were undertaken without scientific provisions and with resort to cement which is totally wrong and still mentioned as a reason for the current process of deterioration of Ethiopia's priceless national heritage.

Moreover, the process of deterioration of the 11 Rock-Hewn churches of Lalibela, a world heritage site of Ethiopia's priceless national heritage is the result of different internal and external factors such as, climate (coolness, sun, rain), pollution, vandalism, light (paper, wood, textile, photos etc.), floods, humidity, moisture, rising damp, animal (pests, birds, rodents, etc.), neglect, abandon, absence of adequate legislation, urban development, deterioration, decay, bio-deterioration, porosity, crystallization etc.

The scale of work required for its conservation reaches to its urgency and the conservation task should have to involve in preserving the cultural heritage. The vulnerability of the monuments needs vast conservation, repair and preservation work of this cultural heritage as a legal protection and zoning. These are basic volcanic rock types and recent sediments. The whole environment of Lalibela, except the church ground, exhibits dark-colored basalt rock. But the scoria basalts are available around the church complex where the churches were carved out.





**Figure 8: European Union’s Shelters Installed to Protect from Water Infiltration**

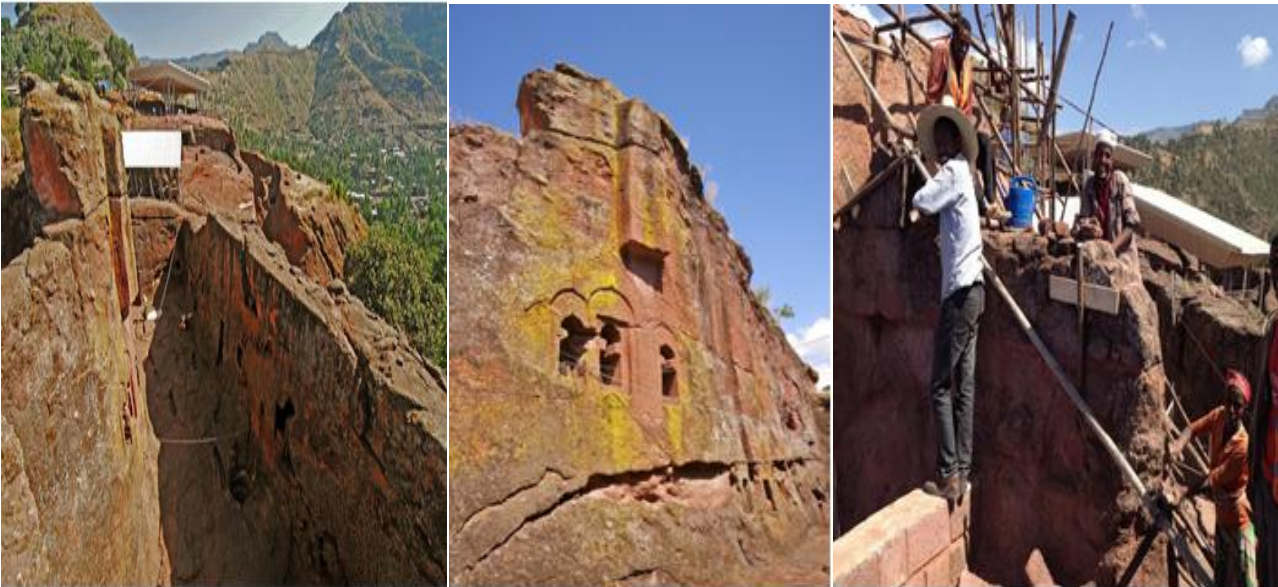
All agree to assure that edges of the rocks and sequences are barely different from the past, from what previous archeological asserted. The structural deficiency and external factors left the monument in a very difficult condition. Archaeologists, geologists and stone cut specialists agree that a long aged process has made the monuments as they are now. The structure of the churches has changed due to human and environmental factors (Del Monaco et al., 2009).

Cultural heritage conservation practices in the 11 Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela show that the safeguarding practice is quite limited and the level of damage remain as a threat to this world heritage site. In general, the state of conservation is impacted not just by the environment’s aggressiveness, but also by human activities and the levels of cultural and environmental education of the people. For this reason the participatory approach investigates ways in which the community members from the town involved in the process of conservation practices in the Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela.



**Figure 9: Protection Work by Local Community in the World Heritage Sites of Lalibella**





**Figure 10: Status of Cultural Heritage Conservation in the World Heritage Sites of Lalibella**

Biological phenomena such as microbiological attack and human factors have also caused deterioration. Several efforts have been made to protect and restore the churches in the past, although some of the early interventions are considered to have damaged the structures, such as the bituminous coating to the external surfaces (ICOMOS, 2010). Erosion and water infiltration due to heavy rainfalls in combination with cracks from inherent faults in the stone and stresses from carving, and chemical phenomena such as the presence of salts as efflorescence on the surface and concretions under it, have caused the disintegration of the rock churches.

Furthermore, the different conservation works on the Rock Hewn Church of Lalibela carried out by hook or by crook aggravated the fragility of the rocks and damaged the monuments. The 11 rock hewn churches of Lalibela as a living heritage, it still needs an urgent conservation work and aims to satisfy the dual purpose of preserving and disseminating conservation knowledge about cultural heritage in an integrated way, in close connection with socio-economic and cultural development at micro and macro level is needed.



**Figure 11: Level of Damage in Bete Amanuel (House of Emmanuel) & Bete Maryam (House of Mary)**



**Figure 12: Level of Damage in Bete Medhane Alem (House of the Savior of the World) & Biete Abba Libanos (House of Abbot Libanos)**

The methods of conservation employed and the level of local community involvement in conservation work needs to offer collaboration support. Being the management and conservation plan needs to identify objectives and a long-term vision for the site, it needs a strong stakeholder participation and interdisciplinary collaboration. However, such conservation actions are not formulated both by the regional government and federal culture and tourism ministry of Ethiopia. The status of cultural heritage conservation in world heritage sites of Lalibella has been evaluated in terms of the cultural heritage preservation, management practice and destruction level.

The result depict that many of the cultural heritage resource are poorly protected and preserved. The consequences of previous conservation work on the current damages to the cultural heritage site, currently, the intervention of different key actors for the cultural heritage management and conservation works in the Medieval Rock Hewn Churches of Lalibela leads to pass through difficulties and controversies.

The failure to have strong conservation efforts and the great gap between the goal of the conservation system and the actual implementation may pave the way for the deterioration of cultural heritage (Greffé, 2004). Hence, the local community and the representatives of the church have expressed their serious concerns about the temporary shelters and the possible impact of damage. Further, this is thought to result in a high risk of collapse of the shelters and put the structures of the churches contrary to the intended protection in a serious danger.

However, despite many reminders, there has been no regular and formal assessment or maintenance of the shelters. Then again, the urban development plan has clearly identified and notified insensitive developments, renewals, increased number of visitors and new tourism infrastructure typologies to harmonize development in a manner that does not jeopardize the values and properties of the world heritage site and the neighboring settlements. Yet, overpopulation and poor sanitation within the core zone of the world heritage property in Lalibela town needs a resettlement of residents that had therefore been under discussion for decades in order to halt further expansion of settlements. Until now, local community often questions the necessity of moving people far away from the churches and such a programs bring some kind of disregard towards local people's, but they also disseminate the perception that the very existence of the local people is a threat to their own heritage.

Inversely, there is a question on the practices of conservation that were used and difficulty in harmonization of different projects and the level of local community involvement in order to find out own ways of restoration work. At large, the scale of work required for its protection and conservation reaches to its urgency. At several levels of government, the conservation of cultural heritage is often seen and is considered as the last line-item to be included in the national budgets and the first line-item to be cut. On top of this, the government disregarded and overstates the urgency of cultural heritage management and conservation effort.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The paper attempts to examine the major result of the cultural heritage management practices on the survival of the Medieval Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela and the legacies it contains. There is a growing concern about the



current cultural heritage management and conservation practices and the low attention given to the practices in Ethiopia. The collective concept of cultural heritage management and the increased importance given to how heritage places relate to their surroundings mark an important shift in thinking.

Conserving our common past will help to maintain strong links with communities. Indeed, only the international community start to appreciate the importance of conserving cultural heritage as it is the expression of identity, reflection of innovation and is the bridge between the past and the present. Further, the paper recommends the adoption of a framework enriched by a philosophy to embraces legal pluralism in heritage legislation and cultural polices. The current Conservation Proclamation of Ethiopia (adopted in 2000) deals with several issues such as research, excavation, registration, subsidy, and technical advice for heritage conservation and needs to be implemented in a more comprehensive ways to save these priceless Christian heritages. Another glaring issue facing Ethiopia is weak cooperation between the federal and regional governments. Under the federal system, Ethiopia is divided into nine ethnic-based regions and two chartered cities. These regional governments are endowed with autonomy in many aspects in their territory by the constitution.

However, the proclamation stipulated that the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCH) has the authority with regard to cultural heritage issues. Thus, there is some confusion over the responsibility of regions for heritage conservation and registration issues in particular.

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