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**ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY**  
**SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY OF ROCK CHURCHES**  
**IN LASTA, NORTHERN WOLLO**

**BY**

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**JULY 2012**

**ADDIS ABABA**

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NORTHERN WOLLO**

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This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Natnael Ketema entitled: An archaeological study of rock churches in Lasta, Northern Wollo and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Masters of Arts (Archaeology) compiles with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality;

Signed by the Examining Committee

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## **Abstract**

An archaeological study of rock churches in Lasta, Northern Wollo

Natnael Ketema

Addis Ababa University, 2012

Early churches constructed in Lasta from the sixth to the fifteenth century include churches built under protective roof of caves of different rock types and rock hewn churches excavated from largely volcanic rock with varying degree of detachment from bed rocks. The churches are believed to be hewn and constructed based on basilica architectural styles and adopting elements of Pre-Christian Axumite structures. The dates for the churches are highly depended on traditional sources. Based on these accounts more than seven churches in Lasta are established during the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, they were built during the Axumite Kingdom.

The expansion of the Axumite Kingdom to Lasta in the 6<sup>th</sup> century provided suitable ground for expansion of Christianity and resultant establishment of churches in the area. Cultural continuity between the Axum and the later periods is endured in rock churches of Lasta. Built up churches of Debre Damo, Yimrehane Kiristos and Imekina Medihanialem are churches product of different periods which show great resemblance to each other. There are also strong similarities in their plan and individual architectural elements of the churches of Bete Medihanialem and Genete Maryam.

The churches remained hidden in mountainous landscape of Lasta. Through time some of the churches are deteriorated because of natural and manmade causes. Little is done to document, promote, conserve and research the churches. As a result the contribution of the tourism sector for development of the region and the country at large remained insignificant.

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## **List of Acronyms**

EBS: Ethiopian Broadcast Service

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

GPS: Global Positioning System

UTM: Universal Transverse Mercator

ICOMOS: International Council on Monuments and Sites

m. a. s. l: meters above sea level

UN: United Nations

INTERPOL: International Criminal Police Organization

UNEP: United Nations Environment Programme

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

WTO: World Tourism organization

## **Organization of the Thesis**

The thesis is organized into five chapters. The first chapter comprises statement of the problem, objectives, scope of the study and methodology as major elements. Chapter two gives general background of the study area. In chapter three the rock churches are described and research findings are discussed focusing on selected features of the rock churches and the aspects they share with their counterpart in other parts of the country. The fourth Chapter focuses on Tourism and Heritage management aspects. The documentation, promotion, conservation and research elements on the sites are discussed in light of actual works done so far. Conclusion and recommendations are given in the fifth chapter.

# CHAPTER ONE

## 1.1. General Background

Structures and buildings hewn from rocks are evident in different parts of the world. There are many rock structures roughly built into natural caves and cliffs. There are also others well executed and continued to fascinate the modern world. Ajanta, caves carved in the basalt cliffs and Ellora caves in India; ancient buildings of Petra in Jordan, carved out of sandstone; a series of caves, hiding places and underground churches dating from the fifth century in Cappadocia, Turkey; various stone temples and structures in China (Brockman 2011) and considerable number of rock churches (rock hewn and cave churches) in Ethiopia are few of rock structures around the world.

Some of them still stand to serve different purposes, purpose for which they originally came to exist or changed their course. Others crumbled hiding their history in ruins. The Bamiyan Caves and Buddha statues, a medieval pilgrimage site for centuries, in Afghanistan destroyed in 2001 by the Taliban (Brockman 2011) is evidence for this. Some of them are carved out or built to serve religious purposes; like the rock churches in Ethiopia and Buddhist temples in India. Others as place of burial like the Lycia tombs, Turkey<sup>1</sup>.

Rock hewn churches and cave churches with varying degree of connection to rocks are Christian structures widely distributed in hill and caves of northern Ethiopia (Buxton 1947; Gerster 1970; Lipage and Mercier 2005; Phillipson 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> Source; [http://www.lycianturkey.com/lycian\\_tombs.htm](http://www.lycianturkey.com/lycian_tombs.htm)

Built up rock churches along with rock hewn churches can be classified as rock churches.

*Churches in rock by this I mean grotto churches; churches built under the protective roof of rock (crags undercut by erosion), or wholly or partly built up in caves. I also mean excavated churches; churches carved from the rock, excavations rather than buildings, some concealed in the mountains, others with a facade. Or again semi-monolithic churches ; excavated churches with three sides more or less free of the surrounding stone and of course pure monolithic churches, worked out of single piece of rock, free on all sides. Churches carved with only the base rooted in the living rock, the wonders of the world of monuments (Gerster 1970: 13).*

The definition seems more appropriate to be used in the context of this study for it includes both rock hewn and churches built in caves. In Ethiopia, there are number of rock churches which fit into these categories. Several of the churches are carved out of solid rocks, churches partly or completely separated from bed rocks; others are simply cave churches with a facade cut from the rock, or simply a cave with few pillars (Findlay 1943). There are still others, churches built up into natural caves (Finneran 2007). This typology is extended by Anfray (1985) in his consideration of the rock hewn churches, rock church tradition of the southern highland regions (Shawa, Sidamo and Bale). His six forms differentiate between varying degrees of incorporation within rock, from excavated monolithic churches to those half-built, half carved. Anfray also differentiates churches built within caves and those which incorporate caves in their structure (Finneran 2007).

According to Bidder (1958) rock churches in Ethiopia, especially rock hewn churches, share few characteristics with rock structures in other parts of the world. On the other hand they embrace different features, which are defining characteristics of rock churches in Ethiopia. There are number of internal and external features unique to rock churches of the country. In the case of rock hewn churches, the closest resemblance to them are the temples of Ellora in India. These structures are freed from the surrounding rock: yet these are different in spirit and character (Ibid).

In fact, there is significant difference even among rock churches in the country in the way they are hewn or built. There are number of rock churches hewn from the front of a cliff. Debre Tsion Maryam, Abba Yohanni, Abraha-Atsebaha, Abune Yemata and Maryam Korkor in Tigray (Gerster 1970; Lepage and Mercier 2005) and Bete Abba Libanos and Bilbala Giyorgis in Lasta are few churches known to be hewn this way. On the other hand most of rock churches in Lasta are believed to be carved out through a process that involved excavation of trenches from top.

## **1.2. Review of previous works**

Lasta was centre of a civilization flourished and left traces, which continued to fascinate visitors, researchers and pilgrims (Sergew 1972; Taddesse 1972). Rock hewn church of Lalibela, few other rock hewn and built up cave churches are mentioned in connection with the Kingdom (Sergew 1972). But when was these rock churches built and hewn is a question needs careful investigations.

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; Philipson 2005; Abebe 2010) done on the centre of Zagwe

dynasty, 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 accounts and most of archaeological investigations are highly focused on the rock hewn churches in Lalibela.

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 Mountains. Besides the record on rock hewn churches of Lalibela, he also described the cave church of Yimrehane Kiristos. Though the account is one of detailed earlier account about the country, it is criticised of exaggeration and credulity (Ibid). In his account, Alvares omitted the churches of Mikael, Beta Abba Libanos, and Bete Qedus Gebriel; nor does he described Bethlehem or Marcoreos (Ibid). Beckingham and Huntingford (1961) 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 20<sup>th</sup> century, contributed much useful information on architecture of the churches. The first to do so since Alvarez was Raffray, who measured the churches and made some good drawings (Buxton 1947).

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 (Ibid).

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). Four of rock churches of Lasta are discribed very briefly and three others are mentioned but descriptions are not given. “Camcanit Michael” (referring to the monolithic church of Kenkenit Mikael), “Sarzena Michael” and “Maucricie Stefanos” *are probably in the region of Lalibela, but it has not been possible to ascertain their exact positions* (Findlay 1943: 27).

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 Medihanialem, the largest church at Lalibela (Beckingham and Huntingford 1961; Finneran 2007).

Playne in her publication *St. George for Ethiopia* (1954) included cave churches of Imekina Medihanialem and Imekina Lideta Maryam. Playne was probably the first visitor to keep account on these churches.

Some rock churches of Tigray, Lalibela and few churches of Lasta are discussed in the publications of Gerster (1966; 1970). He accompanied an expedition organized by the Ethiopian Archeological Institute in 1966 (Asfawossen 2002), besides travelling widely on his own (Buxton 1971). Being photographer, detailed pictures in his publications are of great importance. His detailed picture book is an important documentary source of both for early Ethiopian architecture and painting (Buxton 1971). Yet his works focused on only few churches in Lasta. He addressed built up rock church of Imekina Medihanialem, Genete Maryam, Bilbala Giyorgis, Bilbala Kirkos and Arbatu Ensessa

Recent study by Phillipson (2005) focused on establishing chronology for the rock churches of Lalibela and other studies focused on showing cultural continuity inferred from the architectural aspects are still other ground breaking studies which included rock churches of Lalibela (Phillipson 1998; 2009).

The works of Bidder (1958; 1959) are worth mentioning. Bidder gave brief description, with detailed illustrations and pictures, of rock hewn churches of Lalibela, churches of Genete mariam, Arbatu Ensessa, Bilbala Giyorgis and Kirkos, Sarzina Mikael and Zammadu Maryam (not rock hewn).

Lindahl (1970) also addressed churches Like Asheten Maryam and Genete Maryam, Bilbala Giyorgis in studies focused on architectural history of Ethiopia.

A project organized by The Swedish Foundation Cultural Heritage without Borders (2010) studied cave churches of Yimrehane Kiristos, Imekina Medihanialem, Lideta Maryam, Zammadu Maryam and rock churches in Tigray from 2007 onwards. The project was managed by Balicka-Witakowska, and Gervers, Fritsch and others. Some of the team members made immense contribution in the study of rock hewn churches of Lalibela and other rock churches in Lasta. The description of Wall paintings in the sanctuary of the church of Ganete Mariam by Balicka-Witakowska (2005) is noteworthy.

An M.A. thesis conducted on rock churches in Bugna District (the present Lasta) by Mengistu Gobezie (2004) is another important study on rock churches of the area. Rock hewn churches in Lalibela and three other rock churches are dealt in this research. *Yimrehane Kiristos; a bridge between Axum and Lalibela Civilization* (Mengistu 2011) is another publication came out recently. These studies provided wealth of information regarding the rock hewn churches of Lalibela and the cave church of Yimirehane Kiristos.

Abebe Mengistu (2011) also conducted archaeological survey in Lasta which included ruined rock Church of Tikurza Kidane Mihiret and the church of Maymaryam (not rock church). Though his study had objectives of studying the area for archaeological traces, besides the rock churches, he attempted to look in to aspects which are widely discussed in studies focused on rock churches. It attempts to show the cultural continuity between the Aksum and the later periods in church architecture through review of literatures.

Rock churches of Lasta are also mentioned in other accounts and archaeological studies celebrating the rock hewn churches of Lalibela. But there are no attempts

made to study rock churches of Lasta collectively. As indicated above it is common to see discussion of the churches in literatures in one way or another but is important to consider studying them collectively. In fact most of the available literatures are not representation of carefully managed researches.

### **1.3. Statement of the problem**

Despite growing interest to investigate archaeological treasures in the country, the efforts made to study them are obstructed largely by lack of financial resources and professionals qualified to study them. It is the effort made recently by foreign researchers and few Ethiopians, which brought about better understanding of these heritages.

There is considerable number of rock churches in Lasta, province of Northern Wollo, but it is the 11 rock hewn churches found in Lalibela which attracted the attention of researchers and are being relatively better documented, conserved, promoted and researched. These cultural treasures were declared World Heritage Property in 1980 (Girma and Hecht 1983).

Even though rock churches in Lasta are slightly mentioned in some literatures, it is hardly possible to consider the studies as organized researches in a way they give complete picture of rock churches in the area. Most them are studied either in relation to rock hewn churches of Lalibela, which are the main focus for most of researches or part of survey works conducted in the area.

The prime goal of this study is to investigate wealth of rock churches found in the province of Lasta. There are number of rock hewn and built up cave churches, which

need to be studied in detail. Publicizing these churches to the public in general and the academic community in particular is an important step should be taken.

*The presentation of the archaeological heritage to the general public is an essential method of promoting an understanding of the origins and development of modern societies. At the same time it is the most important means of promoting an understanding of the need for its protection (ICOMOS Charter for the Protection and Management of the Archaeological Heritage 1990 art. 7).*

This research aims to study rock churches in Lasta. Most of them are best described in literatures, while others are known only for their names. So churches which are not given attention will be introduced and dealt along with other churches. The study includes churches familiar in literatures for comparison and gives complete record on type and number of rock churches in Lasta. It also seems important to include these churches to give picture on the present state of the churches, focused on assessment of heritage management and tourism activities.

This research also focuses on showing the present state of the churches and conservation activities need to be done. Thus, equal weight is given to heritage management and tourism aspects.

This study attempts to answer the following questions;

- ❖ What is the number of rock churches in Lasta Woreda?
- ❖ What are the defining characteristic of these rock churches?
- ❖ Are there structural and design similarities and differences between rock churches in Lasta and other rock hewn and built up churches in the country?

- ❖ What heritage management activities need to be done on the rock churches?
- ❖ How the country can benefit from these treasures?

## **1.4. Objective of the Study**

### **1.4.1. General Objective**

The main objective of this study is to conduct an archaeological study on rock church edifices in Lasta.

### **1.4.2. Specific Objectives**

In addition to the general objective stated above the following are specific objectives this study intends to address.

- Collect data regarding the number and type of the rock churches
- Give insight into the current state of the churches.
- Examine if there are structural and design similarities and differences among rock churches of Lasta and other rock churches in the country, especially rock churches of Tigray and rock hewn churches of Lalibela.
- Examine heritage management activities done so far on the sites
- Assess the potentials of the churches for sustainable development

## **1.5. Significance of Study**

In the absence of archaeological researches conducted in a way that gives collective record of rock churches in Lasta, the study may contribute as a source of information for visitors, policy makers, the public and the academic community.

This research on rock churches in the region will be a contribution to the existing studies focused on few churches in Lasta. To my knowledge there are no well-planned and organized archaeological researches conducted on the churches as a group.

Tangible and intangible heritages are aspects connected to the churches. This research will be of great importance in promoting history and culture of the period and the relics under study for it integrates tangible and intangible heritages which holds vital place in the society. It also shades light on current state and conservation activities need to be done.

It is also particularly timely, in light of the growing interest and attempt to study country's archaeological treasures. I hope that the blueprint will be used as resource to promote the rock churches so as to enable the country benefit from these treasures.

Therefore, this study will be of great importance in introducing rock churches in the area to the general public, researchers and governmental and nongovernmental organizations, which in turn facilitate investment and further investigation in many ways.

The methods used and the results obtained may also provide an important base for future studies in the area.

## **1.6. Scope of the study**

This research is conducted on rock churches found in Lasta Woreda. Lasta was a province used to include Lalibela and Bugna; it is now divided into three administrative districts i.e. Lasta, Lalibela and Bugna. The scope of this study is limited to investigation of rock churches in Lasta and two other churches which are

now in a kebele under Lalibela Town Administration i.e. built up cave church of Neakuto Le'ab and Asheten Maryam. Monolithic, semi monolithic and cave churches in Lasta are the focus of this study. All churches which fit this category, regardless of the period they were built, are included. Accordingly this research focused on 12 churches unevenly distributed in 21 Kebeles in Lasta. Based on local accounts the churches date from the 6<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century.

### **1.7. Limitation of the study**

Although this study has yielded some findings, it is not without constraints. Time and budget were the major constraints encountered in the process of producing this thesis. Because of limited resources used in data collection, I was not able to address all the planned activities. GPS coordinates of two churches (built up cave church of Yimrehane Kiristos and semi-monolithic church of Sarzina Mikael) were not taken. Rock hewn church of Mawre Estifanos is not included in the research.

The attempt made to get necessary data is significantly influenced because of unwillingness of church officials at some churches to grant permission to visit inside of churches. For instance I was not allowed to take picture and to see the inside of the church of Asheten Maryam. I have no record of sanctuary (*mekides*) of a single church. Discussion of sanctuaries is totally depended on data from informants (church officials) and literatures.

### **1.8. Research Methodology**

Qualitative rather than a quantitative research method of investigation is mainly used. It has been suggested that explanatory approach provides the most appropriate and fruitful method of explaining detailed elements (Hodder 2005).

Explanatory methods are applied in discussion of selected elements of the churches and to show correlations between the churches or group of churches. Descriptive approach is also applied along with the explanatory approach. Individual churches are described for their location and overall structure.

### **1.8.1. Data Collection**

The data necessary for this study are collected from primary and secondary sources. The data from primary sources were collected during field work. On the other hand secondary sources, relied on documents, were used before and after fieldwork. As a result the study is product of two types of works; library and fieldwork. Fieldwork involves collection of specific information gathered from the study area. This largely comprises field work on the churches and the data collected through direct communication of the researcher with stakeholders.

#### **1.8.1.1. Library and archival material work**

Library work focused towards the compilation and review of the various literatures relevant for the study. Electronic and printed materials are reviewed before and after field work. This secondary database includes the data retrieved from different organizational documents at different levels.

#### **1.8.1.2. Field work**

In archaeological studies researcher is not expected just to observe from a distance but to participate actively and experience interaction with archaeological features, because they can only be understood in depth through active participation and continuous dialogue the researcher expected to have with them (Drewett 2001). The

data regarding the buildings are result of close observation of internal and external elements of the churches.

Absolute locations of 10 churches are taken using GPS. GPS readings are represented in UTM. Taking pictures and videos of the churches and other important features and festivities are the tasks I conducted as part of fieldwork. Festivities like Christmas and Ethiopian Epiphany attracts considerable number of foreign and Ethiopians (largely pilgrims) the town of Lalibela. This gave me the chance to get first-hand information which supported the issues raised in relation to heritage management and tourism.

### **1.8.1.3. Interview**

The main function of the interview within the research agenda is to collect data that help to give input to the study besides the data collected through field work and documents, which take the lion share. This technique is used to collect data from informants who have direct relation with the churches i.e. employees of Lalibela Town Culture and Tourism Office, guides and priests, deacons, and local residents.

Unstructured interviews were widely employed. Unstructured interview was used to collect data from local residents and a guide. Data collected from Culture and Tourism office and Church administrators at each church involved structured and unstructured interviews.

Generally the data needed for the study were collected through Field work, interview and review of documents.

### **1.8.2. Methods of Data analysis**

Analysis is done in two ways. Few and selected numerical data are organized into tables and the results described and explained based on the nature of the data. On the other hand qualitative data collected through observation and interview are analysed by integrating it with the data collected through review of different literatures and documents.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **2.1. Natural and Cultural Setting of The study area**

Lasta is one of the renowned historical sites in the country. The area is known for rock churches widely distributed in mountainous land scape (Heldman 1995; Tekeste 2006). Of all rock churches the eleven rock hewn churches of Lalibela are famous. Lalibela with its eleven rock hewn churches lay at the heart of Lasta. The churches 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 Lasta every year. Christmas and epiphany are pick times in this respect. Besides the rock churches of Lalibela, rock churches like Yimrehane Kirstos, Bilbala Giyorgis, Bilbala Kirkos, Arbatu Ensessa, Asheten Maryam, Neakuto La'ab and Genete Maryam receive huge number of Ethiopian visitors and pilgrims during Christmas. Most of Ethiopian tourists visit these churches in connection with religious celebrations at these churches before the final day of Christmas celebration at Lalibela. The number of foreign tourists also rises during these ceremonies.

#### **2.1.1. Brief Geology of the Area**

The northern part of the Ethiopian plateau is composed of two main different typologies of rocks; Oligocene flood basalts and Mio-Pliocene volcanoes (University of Florence Scientific Mission Final Report 2008). The region is dominated by outcrops of Tertiary volcanic rocks comprising basalt, trachyte and tuff (Delmonaco et al 2010).

The geological series of the area, from the oldest and stratigraphically lower unit, consist of the following formations (Merla et al 1979)

The Ashangi formation; mainly comprises olivine basalt alternating with agglomerates and tuff (Merla et al 1979). This formation predominantly consists of alkaline basalts with inter-bedded pyroclastics and rare rhyolites erupted from fissures. Varying ages are proposed for this formation. The most probable is a Palaeocene to Miocene age range (Kazmin 1975).

The Amba Aiba basalts (Oligocene–Miocene) which mainly consist of flood basalt with rare tuffs. The flows are characterized by columnar jointing and have thickness up to tens of metres (Merla et al 1979).

According to Merla et al (1979) the Amba Alaji rhyolites (Miocene) generally overlie the Aiba basalts. This formation consists of a succession of alkaline to perialkaline rhyolites, alkaline and trachytic alkaline flood basalt. The acidic rocks are thick ignimbrites and tuffs, which crop out widely in the area and form typical landscape elements such as steep walls and cones (Ibid).

The Termaber formation basalts (Miocene to Pliocene) are at the top of the local stratigraphical series. The Termaber formation comprises lenticular basalts with a large component of tuffs, scoriaceous lava flows and typical red palaeosols (Merla et al 1979). These are dominant rock type in the area (Delmonaco et al 2010).

Generally geological formations of the area are result of the Tertiary Ethiopian volcanism, which resulted in flood basalts and associated ignimbrites and rhyolites. In Lalibela area and its environs, only Oligocene flood basalts (Aiba Formation) and

lower part of the Miocene Alaji Formation (rhyolites, welded tuffs, basalts, and scoriaceous basalts) are exposed (Afawossen et al 2008).

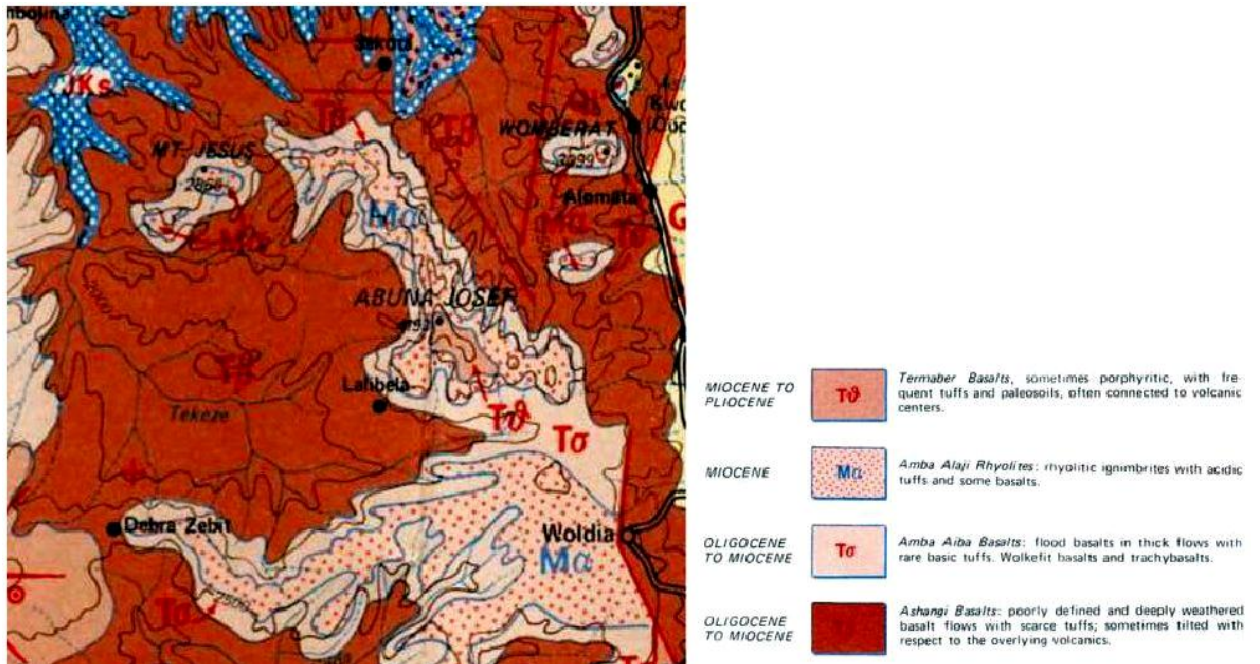


Figure 2. 1 Geological map of Lalibela and its environs (from merla et al 1979) after Delmonaco et al (2005)

The rocks from which the churches are hewn is among the factors determine the structure of the churches. According to Lindahl (1970) irregularity in the shape of the churches is partly related to irregularity of the rocks. The rocks from which the churches are hewn also play significant part in deteriorations related to weathering (Asfawossen et al 2008).

### 2.1.2. Geographical and Environmental Settings

Lasta worda is located at a distance of 700 km from Addis Ababa. It is 180 km from Woldiya and 356 km from Dessie. Lasta is one of 151 wordas in the region (Amhara region). It has 21 village kebeles. The worda is bordered to the North by Waghimera zone (Gazigibla worda), to the south by Meket Worda, to the East by Gidan Worda

and to the West by Bugna woreda (Lasta Woreda Communication Office Report 2011).

The total area of the woreda is 968 square Kilometres. The geographical setting of Lasta is highly dominated by uplands which range from 4200 to 1600 m. a. s. l.; of the total number, 37% of woreda's landscape is upland (mountainous), 20.35% plain and 42.65% rugged terrain (Lasta woreda communication office Report 2011).

It has moderate mean annual temperature i.e. 18 °c. The mean annual rainfall is 750 mm, while 900 mm and 600 mm are the highest and the lowest annual rain fall. The area has two rainy seasons from June to September (big rains) and from March to April (small rains) (Asfawossen et al 2008)

Lasta is home of various plant and animal species which are found in wide-ranging geographical and environmental settings. Mount Abune Yosef is playing an important role in preserving huge number of plant and animal species identified with the area.

Monkey, ape, rabbit, Red fox (endemic to Ethiopia and found in few parks in the country) and others are found in Lasta. Most of the animals are confined to mount Abune Yosef.

Podocarpus, eucalyptus, olive, Juniper trees along with bushes and shrubs and acacia are dominant plant species in Lasta (Lasta Woreda Communication Office Report 2011). Most of the uplands in the area are not covered with vegetation which resulted in soil erosion. Though rehabilitation activities through public participation in recent years improved the situation, well-organized and focused soil management and environmental protection tasks is crucial.

There are number of seasonal and non-seasonal rivers, swamps and springs. Tekkeze, Kechin Abeba, simeno, Tiracha, Bilbala, shebersa, Irfa, Derewa and Abiya are non-seasonal rivers. The total number of seasonal and non-seasonal springs is 101. From 245 swamps 10 of them are non-seasonal the remaining 235 are seasonal. There are 7 manmade dams. Tekkeze, being the largest of all other rivers, is widely used for irrigation projects (Lasta Woreda Communication Office Report 2011).

Up lands, caves and places not easily accessible happened to be preferable for establishment of places of worship. In accessibility of churches can be attributed to the type of church; for instance “*Gedam*” or “*Debir*” in the case of the first group in accessible areas are preferable. On the other hand “*debir*” churches are built close to settlement areas. Protecting the churches from man-made causes of destruction could be the other motive for establishment of churches in places distant from settlement areas. It seems careful site selection, considering aspects mentioned above among other factors, must have been involved in the establishment of most of the churches. Geographical setting of the area, characterized by uplands and natural caves in hills and mountains difficult to climb, provided suitable ground for establishment of churches inaccessible places.

### **2.1.3. Economy**

The main economic activities in Lasta are mixed farming, livestock rearing and paid agricultural labor. Crop production is highly affected by frequently inconsistent rainfall in the single, *kiremt*, rainy season. Agricultural performance is also affected by environmental degradation and soil fertility (Amhara Livelihood Zone Reports 2005). Based on the report Maize, barley, wheat, teff, wheat, finger Millet, bean, peas and *nugg* are few of the cereals and pulses grown in the area, largely for household

consumption. Rain fed agriculture is widely practiced, though there are attempts to use irrigation in few areas suitable for such practice.

Oxen are used to plough, but in very steep areas where ox ploughing is not possible tilling is done manually. Cattle, sheep & goats and equines are the main livestock reared. Shoat and cattle sales are the main source of cash income for the middle and better off households. Productivity of the livestock sector is affected by disease among other factors. Pox and mange are the main livestock diseases affecting shoats and anthrax is a disease affecting both cattle and shoats (Amhara Livelyhood Zone Reports 2005).

Livestock sales, particularly the sale of shoats, constitute the biggest share of income for middle and better off wealth group. The farmers' sale Animal products like butter, eggs to support their income. The other main economic activity is sale of honey (from traditional beehives). The honey sale is an important income source for households in the better off and middle wealth group (Amhara Livelihood Zone Reports 2005).

The role of the expanding tourism sector has increased through the years. The economic structure of the area, where recently modern hotels and tourist services delivery activities has been blooming, now added tourism sector as an integral part.

#### **2.1.4. Population**

The Woreda has total population of 118,185 living in 21 kebeles. From this 58648 are male while the remaining 59537 female (Last Woreda Communication Office Report 2011). The population is unevenly distributed in varying geographical setting. The population distribution and density is determined by the availability of water, arable lands, health related factors and infrastructure facilities, among man-made factors

(Kloos and Aynalem 1989; Mayor and Schaefer 2005). Thus, rugged mountainous land scape and under developed infrastructure are among possible reasons for scattered settlement in the area. The majority of the population lives in rural areas.

#### **2.1.5. Infrastructure**

According to the data from Lasta Woreda communication office, only 4 of the 21 kebeles have access to electricity. Accordingly, the total number of people have access to electricity is 515. Only one kebele has access to fixed telephone service. There are on-going network extension works in most of the Kebeles. Mobile phone service is by far better (Lasta Woreda Communication Office 2011).

Road infrastructure is the most underdeveloped infrastructure sector. Public transportation is available to few kebeles. Only five of rock churches are accessible using vehicles. From 1988 to 1998, thirteen small roads have been constructed with public participation (Lasta Woreda Communication office 2011).

#### **2.1.6. Historical Back ground**

Lasta and Wag areas are considered as the origin of dispersion for Agaw societies of which are currently found in various regions. Apart from Lasta and Wag the Agaws are widely distributed to Halhal Bogos in Eritrea; Dembya in Begemidir and Agaw Midir in Gojjam (Sergew 1972; Taddeses 1972).

*The Agaw society has various names in different regions. In Wollo they are called Wag, in Gonder-Qimant, in Gojjam - Agaw (Awi) and in Eritrea - Blen. Their language is generally called 'Agaw ', which belongs to the central Cushitic language group (Mengistu 2004:18).*

#### **2.1.6.1. The Agaws before the Zagwe kingdom**

The sixth century account of Cosmas is widely referred as the written account regarding the Agaw people. Cosmas noted a major gold trade route passed through the region and Emperor Kaleb assigned them the task of accompanying the merchants who were travelling to Sasu, a gold producing region in the west (Sergew 1972).

Though they appeared as an integral part of the kingdom during the reign of Kaleb, from the available evidences it is evident that the Agaws were in continuous resistance to the southward expansion of the Kingdom long before the reign of Kaleb. Both Monumentum Adulitanum and one of the inscriptions of Ezana make reference to the people of Ath-agau (McCrimdell 1897), and both seem to locate them in the region east of the Takaze (Taddese 1972; 1988).

Cosmas in his Christian Topography states; the king of the Axumites through the governor of Agau, sends their special agents to bargain for the gold. He further states; when he was at this part of the country the king was preparing to start on an expedition against the Homerites on the opposite side of the Gulf (McCrimdell 1897). At time of Kaleb's expedition to south Arabia the land of the Agaws was already an integral part of the Kingdom (Taddese 1972).

#### **2.1.6.2. The Zagwe Dynasty**

The gradual decline of the political power of the Axumite as a powerful kingdom, because of internal and external factors, led to decisive fall of the kingdom and gave the way for the rise of a kingdom among the Agaws.

*The rise of the Zagwe dynasty did not represent a break in the Aksumite tradition. For over three centuries the center of the Christian kingdom*

*was on the doorsteps of Wag and Lasta, and it was from here that it controlled its extensive sphere of influence in the ninth and early tenth centuries. A close review of the few available historical notes on the period shows no signs of a sudden and dramatic advent to power of a completely new cadre of leadership in the country. It rather seems that the culmination of a natural political development within the Christian kingdom of which the central parts had long consisted of the crucial area of the head waters of Takaze and Sallari (Taddese 1972; 54-55).*

Based on the available evidences the Agaws were an integral part of the Axumite Kingdom in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Besides the task of securing the trade route to Sasu, gold producing area in the west and accompanying merchants (Sergew 1972; Taddese 1972), the Agaws were also stationed in Begemidir and Gojjam to serve the same purposes (Sergew 1972).

There is no certainty regarding circumstances in which the kingdom ascended to power. Widely used version attributes the dynastic change to a marriage between a daughter of the last Aksumite king Dil Ne'ad and one of his generals, Mera Tekle Haimanot (a man from Lasta and the founder of the Zagwe dynasty). According to the tradition the power transition was peaceful (Sergew 1972; Taddese 1972).

*There are a number of possible derivations of the word Zagwe. Some writers claim that it is an abbreviation of Zewge Michael, the Christian name of Mera Tekle Haimanot, and the founder of this dynasty. Others believe that it derives from Agaw, the place where the tribe originated while a third view is that the word derives from the Ge'ez verb “አጉዳ” meaning “to pursue, to chase, to persecute”. The second explanation*

*seems the most probable since the previous dynasty also took its name from a locality and, more specifically, a capital city-Aksum. As a capital city which could symbolize the whole empire had not yet been established by the Zagwe they took instead the name of the region where the tribe of this dynasty originated-the north-central part of Ethiopia (Sergew 1972: 239).*

There are also no clear pictures regarding the period the dynasty stayed in power. Figures vary from 133 years to 375 years. However, the available evidences provide dates either 1268 or 1270 for the fall of the dynasty (Sergew 1972).

Among Zagwe Kings Yimrehane Kiristos, Harbe, Lalibela and Ne'akuto Le'ab are popular (Marrassini 1990; Mengistu 2004). Their devotion to their religion coupled with the existence of rock churches which testifies their commitment is one of the possible reasons.

The contribution of Yimrehane Kiristos, Lalibela and Neakuto Leab in connection with the development of rock church tradition will be dealt briefly in the following paragraphs.

Mera Tekle Hayimanot had three sons; the eldest Tetewudem was successor of his father. The other two are Girma Seyoum and Jan Seyoum. There is no mention of whether the other two came to the throne. But sources states that Yimrehane Kiristos, the son of Girma seyoum, succeeded Tetewudem (Sergew 1972).

According to Taddesse (1972) the tradition of building rock churches of the Zagwe period began during the reign of Yimrehane Kiristos. He built a church and another building in the cave where the church is found. The church is built under a huge cave

in densely forested site called Wegre Sehin (Mengistu 2004). The church of Yimrehane Kiristos is located at the distance of 42 km from Lalibela.

Lalibela is the famous monarch of the Zagwe dynasty. He was the son of Jan Seyoum and successor of Harbe (Sergew 1972). He is widely mentioned in connection with the eleven rock hewn churches which still stand in a city named after him. The churches are among precious ancient architectural edifices man kind ever known. There are also claims for other churches built by Lalibela, such as Adadi Mariam close to Addis Ababa and at the pilgrim centre at Lake Zequalla (Finneran 2007).

Ne'akuto Le' ab is another well-known king of Zagwe dynasty. He was the nephew and successor of emperor Lalibela and the son of emperor Herbe. He was believed to have brought up at the court of king Lalibela, his uncle (Mengistu 2004; 28). In addition to the cave church named after him, 6km southeast of Lalibela, according to local accounts the church of Asheten Mariam got its conclusion by Ne'akute Leab.

#### **2.1.7. Introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia and its expansion to Lasta**

The introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia is associated with the coming of Frumentius and the conversion of King Ezana or Abreha (his Christian name), sometimes mentioned with his brother Sizana or Atsbeha. But it might have been long practiced in the country before the conversion of Ezana. Christianity was probably known in Ethiopia before the time of Frumentius, as a faith practiced by many of the merchants from the Roman Empire settled in the Aksumite region in cities, such as Axum and Adulis (Sergew 1972). Finneran (2007) supports this idea on the ground commercial ties Axum had with Roman Empire, where Christians were persecuted. He states that it is probable that there were earlier Christian communities in the Aksumite Empire, among the merchant community in Adulis.

According to Sergew (1972) the introduction of Christianity as state religion came with the conversion of Ezana and but his conversion is not attributed to strong evangelical activities, rather it was because of the desire of the king.

Large scale expansion of Christianity to the Lasta area came during the reign of Kaleb and his son Gebre Meskel. Kaleb's reign was marked by major progress in the spread of the Christian religion among the Agaws in the present district of Wag and Lasta. Local traditions attribute a number of churches to him (Tadesse 1972). Christian Enthusiasm along political and economic factors must have also motivated Kaleb's expedition to Yemen against the Jewish Himyarite ruler who was persecuting Christians there (Henze 2000). Rock hewn churches like Bilbala Giyorgis, Bilbala Kirkos, Arbatu Enssesa and Sarzina Mikael trace their establishment to the reign of Kaleb. On the other hand cave churches of Imekina Medihanialem and Lideta Mariam are believed (with in ever growing suspicion on the dates) to be built during the reign of Gebre Meskel.

## **2.2. Origin and Development of rock church Tradition**

The tradition of hewing churches from solid rocks and building churches in caves (churches built under protective roof of caves) in Ethiopia has long history. The first churches of this type probably emerged in Tigray, which later (the tradition) made its way to other parts of the country. But it is important to note the tradition of hewing and building churches in rocks is not a phenomenon completed its development in a given geographical area. For instance the dates for the rock churches of Tigray range roughly from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries (Gerster 1970; Buxton 1971 Lepage and Mercier 2005; Phillipson 2009). Thus, the elements in the churches could be indicative of varied styles developed over extended time.

Rock hewn churches like Abreha *we* Atsbeha and Wukro Kirkos most likely represent the first group (the earliest churches) of rock churches. These two churches are believed to be hewn during the first Christian kings; Ezana and Sizana (Abreha and Atsbaha respectively) (Lepage and Mercier 2005). On the other hand there are churches built after the fall of the Zagwe kingdom. For instance the church of Maryam Hib'ito is attributed to Zar'a Yaqob in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Buxton 1971). This holds true in the case of rock churches in Lasta excluding the Lalibela group. But the absence of exact dates for rock churches in the country created hindrance in the attempt to establish chronology. The dates assigned to the churches are highly depended on traditional sources. In some cases the dates from traditional sources are conflicting, which complicates the subject.

It is true that rock churches are highly concentrated in the northern part of the country. There are more than 125 documented rock churches in Tigray alone (Asfawossen 2002). Lasta is another area where one can find beautifully carved rock churches. The evidence for rock churches diminish as it extends south. Rock churches of Adadi Maryam and Yekka Mikael are the only traces known in literatures in central part of the country (Findlay 1943; Lindahl 1970).

The first church in Ethiopia was probably built up church, which possibly incorporated elements of both local and outside influences. The original church of Tsion Maryam (destroyed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century) at Axum is believed to be built around the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, soon after the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia (Heldman and Munro-Hay 1993).

A reconstruction of the by Buxton and Matthews (1974) of the earlier church of Axum Tsion is an attempt to give insight into the style of the earlier church and it is

based upon an eye witness account by Alvares, who describes a five-aisled basilica, and also with reference to the giant rock hewn church of Medihane Alem at Lalibela (Finneran 2007).

Based on local accounts, the dates for rock churches like *Abraha we Atsbeha*, *Wokro Kirkos* and *St. Mikael of Dabra Selam* vary from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>2</sup>(Gerster 1970; Buxton 1971; Lepage and Mercier 2005). Apparently, rock church tradition began soon after the introduction of Christianity to the country.

According to Sergew and Teddese (1972) the coming of the nine saints marked a turning point in Ethiopian church history. Churches began to be built in mountains and hills in distant places. This had strong connection with introduction of monasticism. The monastic traditions introduced to Ethiopia in the early days of Christianity were another turning point in the tradition of building churches. The nine saints who came to Ethiopia at the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century established their places of worship in the mountains of Tigray (Sergew 1972).

The influence of these establishments on the styles of built up and rock hewn churches of the later periods is immense. Monasticism has played a significant role in site selection as well. Most of the rock churches either in Lasta or in Tigray are largely distributed to mountains difficult to be accessed using vehicle.

Two churches attributed to *Aregawi* and *Yemata* (among the nine saints) held an important place in the study of rock churches and history of establishment of churches in the country. *Abba Aregawi* or *Ze-Mikael* established his place of worship on a plateau, where serpent worship had been practiced. He established the renowned monastery of *Debre Damo*. The monastery church which exists today was built at that

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<sup>2</sup> The dates for these churches remain tentative for they are exclusively depended on oral traditions.

time by the Emperor Gebre Meskal (Matthews and Mordini 1959; Sergew 1972). Abba Yime'ata went to Ger'alta, and founded a monastery named after him (Sergew 1972). Both churches are known for a very difficult climb needed to visit the places.

When it comes to establishment churches in inaccessible places, monasticism with endured influence can only be considered as among the factors.

Political factors might have also played significant role in selection of places for establishment of churches. The gradual decline of Axum as a Christian state in the 9<sup>th</sup> century is partly attributed to destruction of Axumite posts in the red sea by the Muslims and the Beja rebellion, in the second half of the eight century (Trimingham 1952; Sergew 1972). *During these obscure centuries semitized Axumite peoples driven into the hills of Tigray by the Beja invasion extended their civilizing activities to the wild regions south of the capital* (Trimingham 1952: 14). It seems in accessible mountains which can serve as hiding places during this period of uncertainty were preferable.

The influences on the rock churches on Ethiopia are attributed to both local and outside elements. There is a general agreement on strong influence of Axumite architectural styles of different structures, built for wide ranging purposes, on the architectural styles of later periods (Buxton 1947, 1971; Lindahl 1970; Plant, 1977; Philipson, 1998, 2009).

Excavated Aksumite sites of Enda Mikael, Ta`akha Maryam and Enda Sem`on provided wealth of information on the Aksumite architectural styles. Number of features from of these structures continued to be used in the later periods both in built up and rock churches (Munro-Hay 1991). The methods endured in the early and medieval rock churches with fascinating harmony in styles different from the known

Pre-Christian Axum. In fact the elements in built up structures of this period began to be copied in rock structures long before they appeared in rock churches. Many of architectural features represented in stone on the storied Aksumite stelae were generally of wood. This include wooden door and window frames, beams, more defining protruding feature known as ‘Monkey head’ (Matthews and Mordini 1959; Buxton 1963, 1971; Muro-Hay 1991; Philipson 1998).

These elements continued to be copied from Axumite pre-Christian structures into Christian churches of the earlier period with lasting influence on church architecture (Munro-Hay 1991). The famous monastery church of Debre Damo reflects the way different elements of the earliest pagan structures used. “Monkey head”, a protruding timber pieces inserted into walls and door and window frames are widely applied in this church (Matthews and Mordini 1959; Buxton and Matthews 1974).

Timber beams are another integral element in built up structures. They are used as a strengthening element within walls (Buxton 1947). In some cases of built up churches of later period round monkey heads are missing. For instance the church of Yimrehane Kiristos has no monkey heads on the walls. Monkey heads are applied only on door and window frames of this church. The same fashion is followed in most of rock hewn churches in the country.

According to Buxton (1971) the local methods of construction, which belongs to the pre-Christian tradition, are integrated with methods of church construction brought to the country from outside along with Christianity. He attests the presence of features clearly indicating outside influences. Such influences could possibly be from regions Ethiopia had close ties in Christian times. He further states; the styles in rock and built up churches trace their origin back to Syria on one hand and Egypt and Nubia on the

other hand. But possible influence of Nubia and Egypt needs carefully investigation. Excavations at Adulis and Hawlti-Melazo have brought to light the ruins of basilicas of Syrian type. This may be due to the influence of the nine Saints, since the majority of them are believed to have been of Syrian origin (Sergew 1972: 121).

Lasta is among the areas where the expansion of Christianity felt very early (Taddese 1972). The establishment of the Axumite hegemony over this area probably opened the way for expansion of the religion. Based on the local account, establishment of churches in Lasta dates back to the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Kaleb and his son Gebre Meskel receive the credit for the establishment of the earliest churches in Lasta (Ibid). Based on the dates from traditional sources, ruined rock hewn church of Tikurza Kidane Mihiret, Bilbala Giyorgis Bilbala Kirkos, situated at close distance to each other; Sarzina Mikael and Sekota Meskel, in Sekota Woreda are rock churches believed to be hewn during the reign of Kaleb. On the other hand two cave churches are believed to be constructed during the reign of Gebre Meskel i.e. cave churches of Imekina Medihanialem and Lideta Maryam.

The coming to power of the Zagwe dynasty marked another turning point in the history of Christianity and establishment of rock churches in the area. Rock churches flourished in Lasta area during this period. The cave church of Yimrehane Kiristos, the eleven rock hewn churches of Lalibela and rock hewn church of Asheten Maryam are celebrated rock churches believed to be hewn during this period. This period is considered as reflection of the peak of rock hewing technology (Tekeste 2006). It is certain that the churches integrated elements from known churches in Tigray, or Lasta itself. Based close studies of architectural elements and recorded accounts, the church of Tsion Maryam and the monastery church of Debre Damo are believed to be models

for the churches of Bete-Medihanailem and Yimrehane Kiristos respectively (Matthews and Mordini 1959; Beckingham and Huntingford 1961; Buxton 1971). Though the original church of Maryam TSION is not able to prove this, the church of Debre Damo is a living evidence.

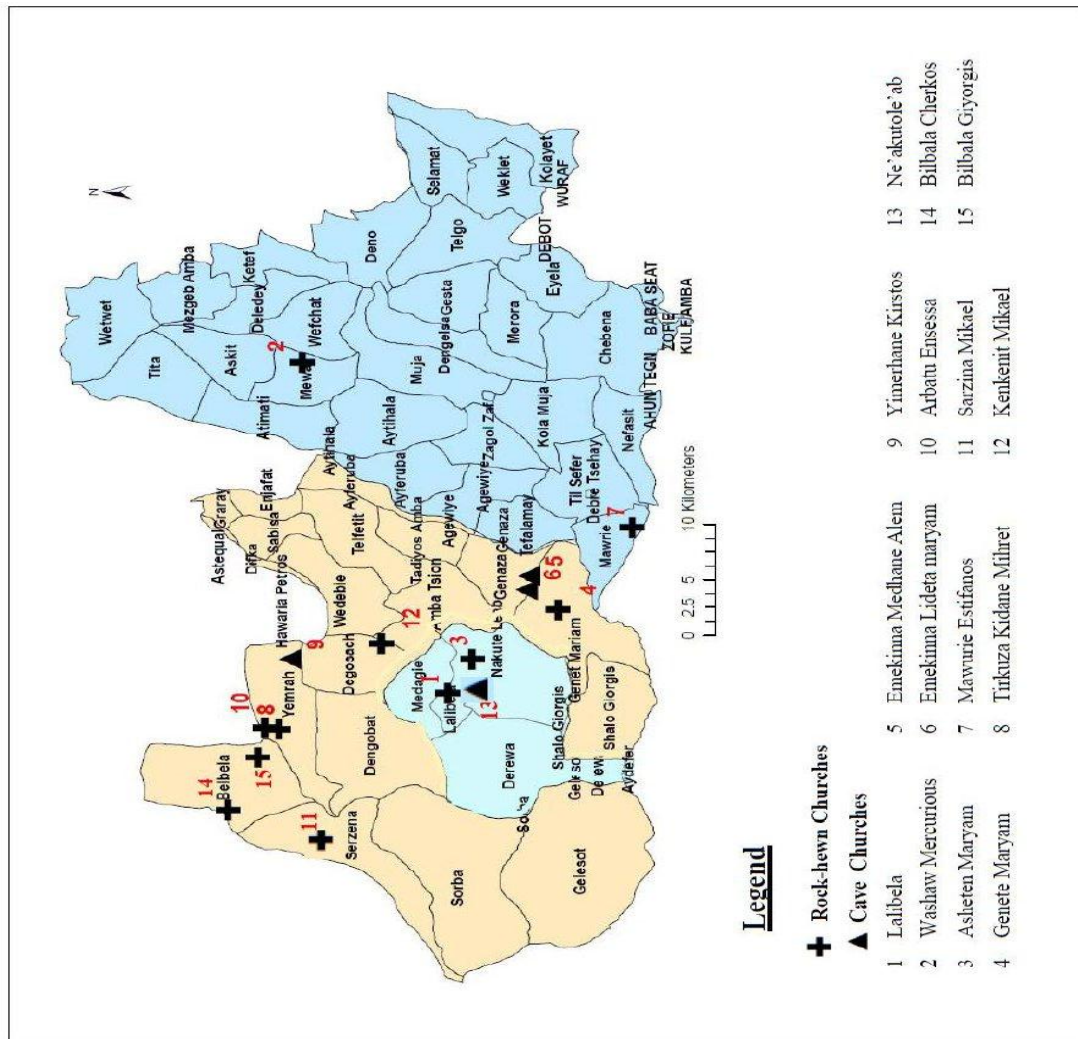


Figure 2. 2 The distribution of rock-hewn and built-up cave churches in Last (after Abebe 2010)

Based on the dates from local accounts for the church of Genete Maryam, it is the only church built after the fall of the Zagwe Kingdom. The church is believed to be built by Yekkuno Amlak in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

### 2.2.1. Type and internal arrangement of Churches

Most of the churches in Ethiopia have either round or rectangular shape. But round churches are believed to be later than rectangular ones. Round churches are common in the southern part of the country while rectangular churches are characterise church in northern part of the country (Marcos and Marsie 1959; Pankhurst 1990; Finneran 2007). Influences from the basilica of Byzantine world, the rectangular shapes of the Aksumite tradition and possible influence from Hebrew temples are presented as possible models for rectangular structure of earliest churches in Ethiopia (Lindahl 1970). Rectangular churches are still evident in many parts of Tigray (Munro-Hay 1991).

Ethiopian orthodox Tewahido Church building is expected to be divided into three areas. *Kine Mahilet*, *Kiddist*, *Mekides*. *Kene Mahlet* is the place where hymns are sung. To this part the populace at large has ready access. The next chamber is the *Kiddist* or '*anda ta'amar* ('place of miracles') which is generally reserved for the priests but to which laymen have access for the administration of communion. The inner most part is the *makdes* or *kedduse keddusan* where the tabot (Ark) rests and to which only senior priests and the king are admitted (Ullendorff 1968).

## CHAPTER THREE

### 3.1. General Presentation and Discussion of Findings

#### 3.1.1. General presentation of the Churches

In the following section the churches are described for their geographical location. In addition, architectural elements are discussed in the attempt to show similarities and differences among the rock churches. Dates of constructions, which are exclusively depended on traditional sources, are also given.

	Name of the church	Category
1	Abune Yosef	Cave church
2	Arbatu Ensesa	Semi Monolithic
3	Asheten Mariam	“
4	Bilbala Giyorgis	“
5	Bilbala Kirkos	“
6	Genete Mariam	Monolithic
7	Imekina Lideta Maryam	Cave church
8	Imekina Medihanialem	“
9	Kenkenit Mikael	Monolithic
10	Mawre Estifanos	Rock hewn
11	Neakuto Le’ab	Cave church
12	Sarzina Mikael	Semi-Monolithic
13	Yimrehane Kiristos	Cave church

*Table 3. 1: List of rock hewn churches in and around Lasta Woreda (Source; Lasta Woreda Culture and Tourism Office 2011)*

This study addressed 12 rock churches<sup>3</sup> found in Lasta. As it is indicated the number of recorded rock churches (still in-service) in Lasta is 13. Ruined rock hewn church of Tikurza kidane Mihiret, located at a close distance to the rock hewn churches of Bilbala Giyorgis and Arbatu Ensessa is not included in the list. I excluded the church of Tikurza Kidane Mihiret because it is no longer in service and severely ruined which makes it difficult to discuss any of its features. It is also worth noting that it is discussed in recent work by Abebe (2010).

Rock hewn church of Mawre Estifanos is excluded because of constraints mentioned in separate section. However, for larger part the data presented here could be a representative of the features this church possibly embraces. According to traditions the church is attributed to King Gebre Meskel to whom the construction of rock churches of Immekina Medihanialem; Lideta Maryam (though the dates are point of contention) in Lasta and the famous monastery church of Debre Damo in Tigray are attributed. Because of question on the dates and variation in architectural and other traits of churches, believed to be established the same period, it is not appropriate and possible to make an exact statement on various features of the church. Above all it is not possible to tell current state of the church.

The churches are scattered geographically to wider area. Most of them are semi-monolithic and cave churches. Except Genete Maryam and Kenkenit Mikael, the other rock hewn churches are semi monolithic.

Rock hewn churches found in Bilbala area i.e. Bilbala Kirkos, Bilbala Giyorgis and Arbatu Ensessa; monolithic church of Genete Maryam and cave church of Yimrehane

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<sup>3</sup> The number includes two churches which are under Lalibela Town Administration i.e. Asheten Maryam and Neakuto Le'ab

Kristos are, relatively, easily accessible and frequently visited churches. On the other hand Cave churches like Imekina Medihanialem, Imekina Lideta Maryam, Abune Yosef and monolithic church of Kenkenit Mikael are not well known to tourists and the local people. These churches are located on remote and inaccessible mountains. But they are of great importance in terms of the history they embrace and the contribution they could make in the attempt to study rock churches in the country in general and the Lasta area in particular.

### **3.1.1.1. Genete Maryam**

It is a huge monolithic church located at elevation of 2403 m. a. s. l., with UTM coordinates 512133 E and 1321721 N.



*Figure 3 . 1: Sheltered Monolithic Church of Genete Maryam*

The church is believed to be hewn during the reign of Yekuno Amlak at a close distance to Lalibela, centre of the Zagwe dynasty and a place where beautifully carved rock churches are found. The motive for the establishment of this church at Lasta

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<sup>4</sup> Except pictures noted for sources, all of the pictures (including this) are from personal archive of the researcher. The pictures are taken during two months field work (November 21, 2011 to January 23,2012)

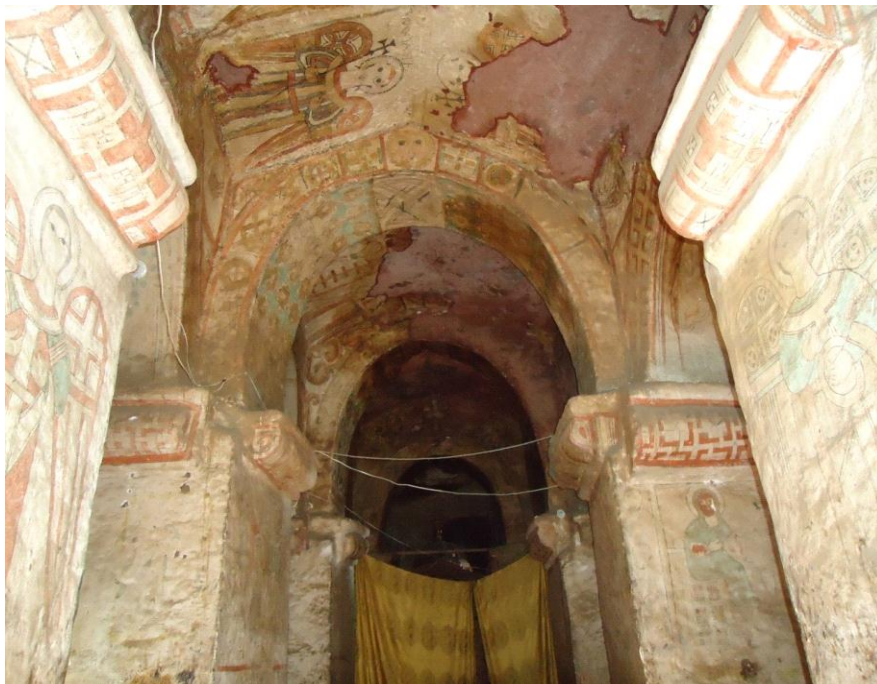
could be a deliberate attempt to reflect restoration of the Solomonic line, which was claimed to be “broken” (Huntingford 1965) as a result of the coming to power of the Zagwe dynasty or simply religious enthusiasm. Relying on the dates for the churches in Lasta, which is based on local accounts, the church is preceded by all of rock churches in Lasta.

It incorporates several features from different churches in Lasta. It resembles the church of Bete Medihanialem in its overall structures. External colonnades are features evident in both churches. As opposed to Bete Medihanialem, the colonnades of the church of Genete Maryam are thick and short. It is the only church in the group of churches under study which has colonnades in all (four) sides. Blind arcades on the roof of the churches are other features the two churches have in common. The roof of Bete Medanialem bears only blind arcades, while the roofs of the church of Genete Maryam have crosses carved in the arches.

The church is decorated internally with Frescoes. It is one of the few churches internally decorated. The frescoes on the walls, ceiling and columns portray varied scenes. The paintings are applied on plaster which covers almost every part of the church. The plaster is not limited to the inside of the church. The external parts behind the colonnades are also covered with plaster. The western and Eastern façades bear carved and painted features. There are few scenes painted on these parts of the church. It has 12 windows worked into curved, crossed and square openings. Some of the openings are filled with lattices. The church has three doors with frames common in rock churches.

Swastikas<sup>5</sup> are roughly carved on blind windows to the right and left corner of the main entrance. Above these features on blind windows are two openings. The openings are similar with twin arcades on blind windows of Debre Damo, Yimrehane Kiristos and Bete Medihanialem. Monkey heads project from the wall to form angles of the false windows. The twin arced is better executed on a blind window to the left of the entrance. False windows are also carved on the eastern faced. The church is arranged into nave and two aisles.

It has 4 massive columns. Pilasters with brackets are integrated into the part that extends from two flanks of the west entrance to form a vestibule. Arches connect the pilasters with columns. It has 24 external colonnades.



*Figure 3. 2: Eastward view into the sanctuary: arches and painted, thick columns with bracket capitals and ceiling*

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<sup>5</sup> It is suggested that Swastika is a sign more than 3,000 years old. But nothing is certain on the origin and use of the symbol in ancient world. The symbol is evident on walls of some of the churches like Bete Maryam and churches like Genete Maryam and Yimrehane Kiristos in the Lasta group. It is widely seen carved on blind windows.

### **3.1.1.2. Imekina Medihanialem**

It takes 2 hours climb from Genete Maryam. This church along with the church of Imekina Lideta Maryam is located on a mountain top which cannot be accessed using any transportation means.

It is located at elevation of 2988 m. a. s. l., with UTM coordinates 515328 E and 1323822 N. The church is built under the protective roof of cave. Like the church of Yimrehane Kristos and Imekina Lideta Maryam it has an enclosure built recently and the church cannot be seen from outside.

According to local accounts it is believed to be built during the reign of King Gebre Meskel, son and successor of Kaleb in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

It is a church with a nave and two aisles in basilica arrangement. The vaulted roof covers the space from the east end to the plain roof, space that separates the vault from the sanctuary dome. There is a decorated dome, which rises above the Holy of Holies. The dome rests on plain roof. The dome is decorated internally with saintly figures and it is pierced with cross shape at its North West direction. There is clear demarcation between the aisles and nave. Sharply rising roof and clerestory covers the nave. The aisles have low and plain roof.

Two lintels run from a wall in the east, main entrance, to the sanctuary in the west. The lintels are supported on wooden brackets inserted into the wall at the entrance and extend to the column at the passage into the sanctuary.

Frieze, which contains wooden Monkey heads, covers the whole nave area. The frieze in the nave lay above lintels. On the west and east walls the frieze is applied on the

walls (the monkey heads are inserted into the wall). Above the frieze is clerestory with eight openings. The ceiling is made of timber and varying features are painted on it. Plaster is applied on the vaulted roof and the dome, covered with rubbles and earth.



*Figure 3. 3: Painted dome above the sanctuary, decorated ceiling, Frieze and partial view of bracket capitals*

Openings intercept the dressed stone beams to form square small framed windows with wooden monkey heads. The openings and windows are filled with wood and metal fillings of different shape.

The wall is made of rubbles with earth mortar and dressed stone beams. It has around 20 windows and 3 doors. The doors in the eastern and northern façade are worked with wooden frames and monkey heads. The door on the southern side has monkey heads inserted into the beam above wooden lintel.

An arch at the entrance of the sanctuary rests on two stone columns. The columns have bracket capitals but no base.

The frescoes in the church decorate the walls and the two columns while the ceiling and the panels are decorated with geometrical features.



*Figure 3. 4: Cave Church of Imekina Medihanialem*

### **3.1.1.3. Imekina Lidetamaryam**

This church is situated at a mouth of natural cave, around 20 minute walk from the church of Imekina Medihanialem. The main church cannot be seen from outside because of an enclosure, built in modern times, encircling the church.



*Figure 3. 5: An enclosure Encercling the Church of Imekina Lideta Maryam*

It is located at elevation of 2985 m a. s. l and 0513907 E and 1324091 N UTM coordinates. Like the church of Imekina Medihanialem church is also believed to be built during the reign of Gebre Meskel (*Kes Yalew Eshete*, Pers. Comm.).

The churches have many aspects make them alike. For instance both churches are built in caves. Both churches have vaulted roof. But unlike the church of Imekina Medihanialem, this church has no dome. The exterior of the church is covered with plaster, applied on rubble which covers the roof and other parts of the church. This

church is smaller than the church of Imekina Medihanialem but arranged in similar way. Vaulted roof marks the nave area while the plain roof covers the two aisles. The vault is not elaborated as the roof of Imekina Medihanialem. The roof projects from lintels supported by two pillars. There is no clerestory or frieze, which lay above lintels as opposed to the case in Imekina Medihanialem.

It has two monolithic stone columns with bracket capitals. One of the columns has capital worked on the monolithic shaft. Two wooden beams run from the entrance to the sanctuary in the eastern end. Besides the stone pillars there are two wooden features named as “*Beleth*” or “*Aymaid kum*” meaning upright. They rise from ground and end half way to the ceiling and not connected to any part of the building except the ground. Tradition states that they were brought from Jerusalem through Eretria. Elephant and Camel were used to transport these materials from Massawa (*Kes Yalew Eshete, Pers. Comm.*). My informant used a painted Elephant and Camel above the main entrance to testify the tradition.

It has ten windows. The windows are filled with metal and wooden fillings of different type and size. Pierced metal window fillings with cross and circle shapes are widely used. It has two doors. The main entrance has two monkey heads inserted into the angles of wooden frames at lower part of the door. It has three sections arranged into *Kine mahilet*, *Kidist* and *Mekides*. The church is roughly 8.53 m wide, 7.86 m long and 4.9 m high.

The external of the church has not integrated any of the features known in other built up rock churches. There is no evidence of reinforcement of the wall with either wooden or stone beams. The paintings of Angels, saints and animals cover the walls,

while the ceiling is decorated with geometrical motifs. The paintings do not reflect skilled workmanship.

Dates as late as the 13<sup>th</sup> century or even later are proposed for the churches of Imekina Medihanialem and Lideta Maryam by (Gerster 1970 and Balicka-Witakowska et al 2010). They base their argument on the architectural style of the churches. I suspect good condition of the churches equally helped this argument. There are no large scale restoration activities on these churches, but these churches happened to be among the few churches in Lasta in good state. It is worth considering their suggestion for further investigations.

#### **3.1.1.4. Abune Yosef**

This church is situated beneath a mountain elegantly stood there to add grace to refreshing attractive natural scenery. The mountain is the second highest in the region and 4<sup>th</sup> in the country with elevation of 4190 m a. s. l. Abune Yosef is a name for the mountain, the church and the surrounding area.



*Figure 3. 6: Mount Abune Yosef and its environs*

The church is located at elevation of 3711 m. a. s. l, with UTM coordinates 520766 E and 1343660 N. It is built under basalt cave. It located east of the town of Lalibela

The establishment of the church is associated with the coming of Abune Yosef to the area. It is said that he came from Bulga area and established a place of prayer for himself, which later became church for the community. The cave is believed to be excavated in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (*Merigeta Kelemewerk, Pers. Comm.*). According to traditions the church is excavated by Abune yosef himself. But there are no details of the excavation of the cave and traces of built up structure. The existing church was built during the reign of Empress Zewditu<sup>6</sup>.

The church has three sections. The first is the entrance, with roof covered with corrugated iron sheet. The second is the *mahilet*; 10.5 long, 7.2 wide, and 3.96 high. Holy water of the church is found North West corner of the *mahilet*. The third is the *mekides* (Holy of Holies), a place where the ark is placed. It is separated from the *mahilet* by a wall worked from stone and mud mortar.

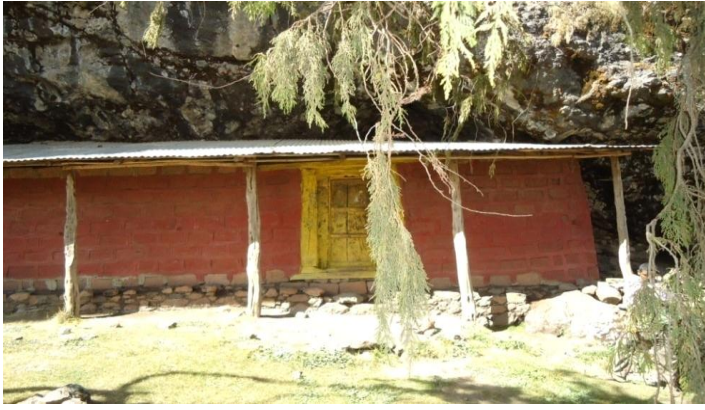
According to my informant (*Merigeta Kelemewerk, Pers. Comm.*) behind the *mekides* there is a “tunnel” which connects the church with the church of Yimrahane Kiristos.

Being later in its construction, the existing church has no significance in reflecting the architectural and other skills exerted in the construction of the church.

Nothing is certain regarding the cave. There are no evidences of excavation except the traditional sources. It is not clearly stated even by traditional sources whether the excavation included the ‘tunnel’ behind the *mekides*.

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<sup>6</sup> reigned from 1916 to 1930 (Bahiru 1991)



*Figure 3. 7: The church of Abune Yosef and the cave*

### **3.1.1.5. Neakuto Le'ab**

It is another built up cave church located at a close distance to the town of Lalibela. It is located 6 km south east of the town of Lalibela. The church is located at Elevation of 2429 m a. s. l. with UTM coordinates 507044 E and 1326533 N.

Like the church of Abune Yosef the existing church was built very recently during the reign of Empress Zewditu.

The outer section retains the original characters of the church to serve as leaving evidence of the church built around 800 years (*Kes Desalegn, Pers. Comm.*). The church was built under a basalt cave. It is the most inner section of the church, incorporated into the present church, where King Neakuto Le'ab used as a place of prayer and a place where the *Tabot* used to be placed. The niches left of the *mahilet* are believed to be used to place *Tabot*.

There are some movable heritages presented by notable persons. Gold cross presented by Emperor Tekle Giyorgis and a drum gift from Wele Bitul (*Kes Desalegn, Pers. Comm.*) are few to mention.



*Figure 3. 8: Cave Church of Neakuto Le'ab*

### **3.1.1.6. Kenkenit Mikael**

It is located 17 km northeast of the town of Lalibela at elevation of 3135 m. a. s. l. with UTM coordinates 509124 E and 1335006 N. It is a monolithic church.

The type of rock from which the church is hewn contributed a lot for a deterioration the church is now facing. It is believed to be built by Girma Asferi, an Axumite King in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The access to the church is through a cell found to the south west of the church. This independently excavated cell gives access to the courtyard.

The features at the entrance and inside this structure have striking similarities with other churches like Bete Gologotha and Abba Libanos at Lalibela. The cell has original, 1.12 meter wide door. To the right and left of the entrance there are two crosses and two other reliefs carved on rock. The relief at the left side shows evidence of destroyed engraving. The similarity of the two crosses and similarity of the niche at the right and surviving part of the left one, gives an impression that the other feature probably resembles the right one. The carved feature to the right of the entrance has striking similarity with reliefs in the church of Gologotha at Lalibela.



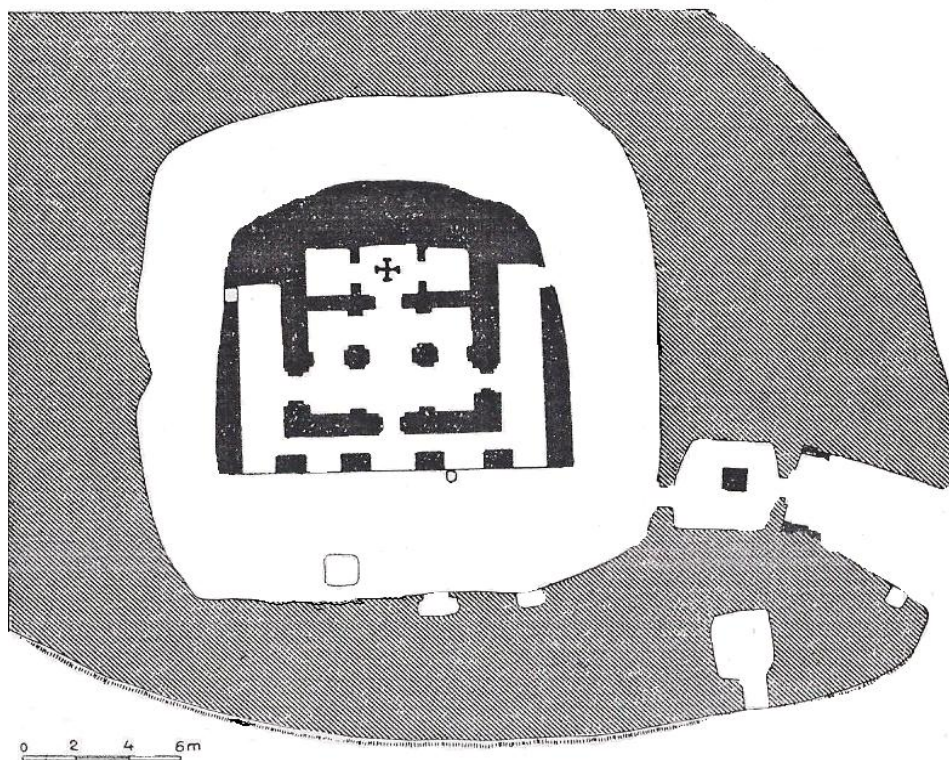
*Figure 3. 9: A feature to the right of the entrance of Kenkenit Mikael (above) and relief to the left of the entrance to the church of Golgotha at Lalibela (below)*



Monkey heads are another feature of the exterior of this section. The monkey heads are used in similar way they are used in other rock hewn churches. Recesses form frames of the door and at the top there are two monkey heads project above the corner of imitated frames. There is no evidence of these projecting elements, probably destroyed, at lower part of the door. Inside the cell there is a massive column with cubic capital.

The church is detached from the main rock in all sides. But it is difficult to differentiate the parts left unfinished by the excavators from parts crumbled later (because of natural and manmade factors) when it comes to parts constitute the monolithic church. It seems that galleries to the north and southern sides of the church were formed in closed space. It is possible that these parts were attached to the main church at the top. But it is difficult to make an exact statement on this because the church is severely degraded. For instance it is difficult to tell the exact point of extension of the existing “outer walls” in the northern and southern façades. The eastern façade forms the only wall of the main building. The church is roughly 10.8 meter long and 8.5 wide and 4 meters high, from inside.

There is a significant variation between the ground plan by Monti della Corte (1940) and the existing structure in its western face. Only two of four structures, probably represented as pillars, in Monti Della Corte ground plan exist.



*Figure 3. 10: Plan of the church of Kenkenit Mikael (after Monti Della Corte 1940)*

The windows are formed in arches. There are no original window fillings. Rubbles and wood are filled into the arched windows in an attempt to protect the church from looting and other causes of destruction. Highly deteriorated frame structures are evident on the doors. The door on the northern façade has monkey heads. These features are seen well preserved inside the church on the doors of the northern and western facades. There are also traces of imitated wall structures of built up churches in the way executed elsewhere on walls of rock hewn churches of Lalibela. For instance the walls of Bete Amanuel at Lalibela are possible imitation of wall of built up churches. Timber beams of built up churches like the church of Yimrehane kiristos are seen copied in recesses and projections on the walls of Bete Amanuel. There is a clear distinction between the horizontal timber beam and the part built with rubbles or

stones worked with earth mortar, common in built up churches, on the walls of Bete Amanuel.

In both cases round monkey heads are not copied. In fact this church has only a line of this feature, while the entire wall of Bete Amanuel is worked in this way. Arbatu Ensesa is another church with the features.

The columns have carefully carved bracket capitals. Like most of the rock churches in Lasta, the columns have no base. The kidist and Mekides form the sections of the church. The mahilet is outside of the church, in a cell with a column. The sanctuary is screened with cloth curtain.



*Figure 3. 11: Monolithic Church of Kenkenit Mikael*

#### **3.1.1.7. Bilbala Giyorgis**

This church is located around 30 km from the town of Lalibela and it takes 20 to 25 minutes from Bilbala, small kebele. It is situated at elevation of 2230 m. a. s. l., with UTM coordinates 499098 E and 1344275 N.

This church is one of frequently visited churches next to those in Lalibela. It receives huge number of Ethiopian and foreign pilgrims and visitors during Christmas. The church accommodates two Arks (*Tabotat*) the Ark of St. Mary, in the small hall connected to the main church through tunnel, and the Ark of St. George. The underground of the church has only a section and accessed from the southern face.

The church of Bilbala Giyorgis is a huge semi monolithic church. Part of the church is attached to the main rock. The extension of the church's roof is attached to the rock in three sides. It is freed from the main rock only in the south.

It is excavated from front to back of a hill. It is dug in all three sides - attached to the bed rock at the top - forming a passage which has entrances in the left and right flanks of the southern façade. Unlike the church of Sarzina Mikael which has five pillars, Bilbala Giyorgis has no pillars to support the roof of the passage. Two engaged columns form an arch to the left of the main entrance in the tunnel.

It has west to east internal arrangement i.e. the main entrance is found in the west while the sanctuary lays in the east. It has four columns with capitals and cubic bases. Two distinctive architectural elements characterize the inside of the church. From the entrance in the west all the way to the sanctuary, there is a series of arches that spring from the columns on the left and right of the nave. On the other hand lintels extend from the entrance to eastern end. The lintels are intercepted by columns and fills inter columnar space on a plain ceiling. At every junction there are capitals formed at the end of the lintels. While the arches have their own bracket capitals that project inward.



*Figure 3. 12: Eastward view from central nave area into the sanctuary; arches, lintels, columns with roughly worked bracket capitals*

It has five carefully worked doors. There is a hewn small porch at the entrance of the southern façade. The church has 3 windows filled with rubbles. Blind arced, formed in recess, lay on the space above the windows in the southern façade of the church. This feature is similar to the arcade on the southern façade of Bete Meskel at Lalibela.

The doors and windows of the church incorporated various features of Axumite architecture. Monkey heads are placed above the frames of the doors and windows. The frames are worked in two or three lines of recesses carved inward. Though there is no painting, carved features are evident on some parts of the church.

#### **3.1.1.8. Bilbala Kirkos**

It is a huge semi monolithic church located 35 kilometres from the town of Lalibela. The church is one of the few churches in Lasta accessible using vehicle. It is situated at Elevation of 2216 m. a. s. l., with UTM coordinates 494446 E and 1346484 N.

This church is believed to be hewn during the reign of Emperor Kaleb in the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. It is one of many rock hewn churches hewn in Lasta during his reign. The base of the western façade is higher than the other faces, and the wall above bear niches. The niches stretch from the podium to the roof. Small arched windows (similar in design with the niches), some of them filled with rubbles, rest inside the niches. The church has 3 doors on three sides freed from the main rock. The eastern side is attached to the main rock, making it semi monolithic church. It has seven windows. Two niches in the northern face have windows carved in cross shape. The church has a total of five sections. Three of the sections are part of the *Mekdes* (*Kes Niguse Legesu*, Pers. Comm.).

It has four columns with distinct capitals and cubic base; carefully worked bracket capitals rest above carved cubic structures. The cubic structures slightly protrude to make a distinction from the shafts.

There is a small cupola above arched way to the sanctuary. The sanctuary is separated from the rest of the church by a wall and the arched entrance is screened by cloth curtain.

The church is decorated with frescoes. Like the case at Genete Maryam, the paintings are applied on plastered walls, ceiling and columns of the church. Unlike the well preserved frescoes of Genete Maryam, the paintings in this church are highly deteriorated. For larger part, the murals are faded while the others are lost with flicked off plasters. Murals on two of columns in the church are beautifully painted and well preserved. The style of painting indicates a later date for these murals. The twelve apostles on the ceiling and Kirkos, for whom the church is dedicated, on horseback

with his mother on the wall left of the main entrance are few to mention. The ceiling is largely covered with painted and carved crosses.

Window and door frames are copied with relative accuracy. Monkey heads accompany the window and door recesses.

The church is in good condition. It is covered with iron sheet since 1989 (*kes Niguse Legesu, Pers. Comm.*) which protected it from rain water and flood. It is one of the churches better described along with rock hewn churches of Lalibela.



*Figure 3. 13: Semi-monolithic church of Bilbala Kirkos; a framed (formed in recess) entrance to the courtyard, western facade of the church with blind arches and shelter*

### **3.1.1.9. Arbatu Ensesa**

It is located 6 kilometres from Bilbala Giyorgis and 36 kilometres from Lalibela, at elevation of 2237 m. a. s. l. and 0501700 E and 1343753 N UTM coordinates. It is a small semi monolithic and one of the churches believed to be hewn during the reign of Kaleb in the 6<sup>th</sup> century (*Merigeta Yibabe, Pers. Comm.*).

It has four internal columns. The northern side is totally attached to the bed rock, while the other two sides are connected in varying degree to the rock from which the church is hewn. Only the southern façade is freed from the bed rock.

The church has certain features common in rock churches of Lalibela. Features like monkey heads, false windows and imitated lines of wall structures are decorative elements on the southern façade.



*Figure 3. 14: Semi-monolithic church of Arbatu Ensesa*

It has five windows carved in arches. Below the arched windows is a line of projecting wall structures. Below this there are blind windows on the walls of partly excavated sides. Unlike the false doors known from other rock churches; for instance on the walls of the Bete Giyorgis at Lalibela, the blind windows are not formed in recess. They are rather identified by the four projecting features placed on the walls.

It has two doors at the southern and western facades. They are formed in frames. The door in the western side of the church has only two monkey heads, at the top of the

door, with deteriorated frames. The doors are replaced with timber doors of recent times.

Like the exterior, the inside of the church does not reflect careful and skilled workmanship. Four columns make distinction between the nave and the two aisles. The capitals are carved in cruciform. Two different elements meet at the capitals; the arches of the nave and lintels of the aisles. The sanctuary is found in a separate section. It is separated from the other parts by a wall with wooden door.

The church is deteriorating because of natural causes; mainly rain water resulting flood. Though the church is sheltered since 1970's, there is still flooding during the summer (*Merigeta Yibabe, Pers. Comm.*).

#### **3.1.1.10. Asheten Maryam**

It is roughly built semi-monolithic church, an hour climb to a mountain from Lalibela. The church is located at the top of mount Asheten at elevation of 3089 m. a. s. l., with UTM coordinates 0507731 E and 1328208 N, overlooking the town of Lalibela.

It is a semi monolithic church. The southern and eastern facades of the church are freed from the main rock. Like the churches of Sarzina Mikael and Bilbala Giyorgis the church is excavated from inside in the western and eastern façade. The northern façade has porch with colonnades. But as opposed to the two churches the excavated space in the eastern face is formed into a faced freed form the main rock.

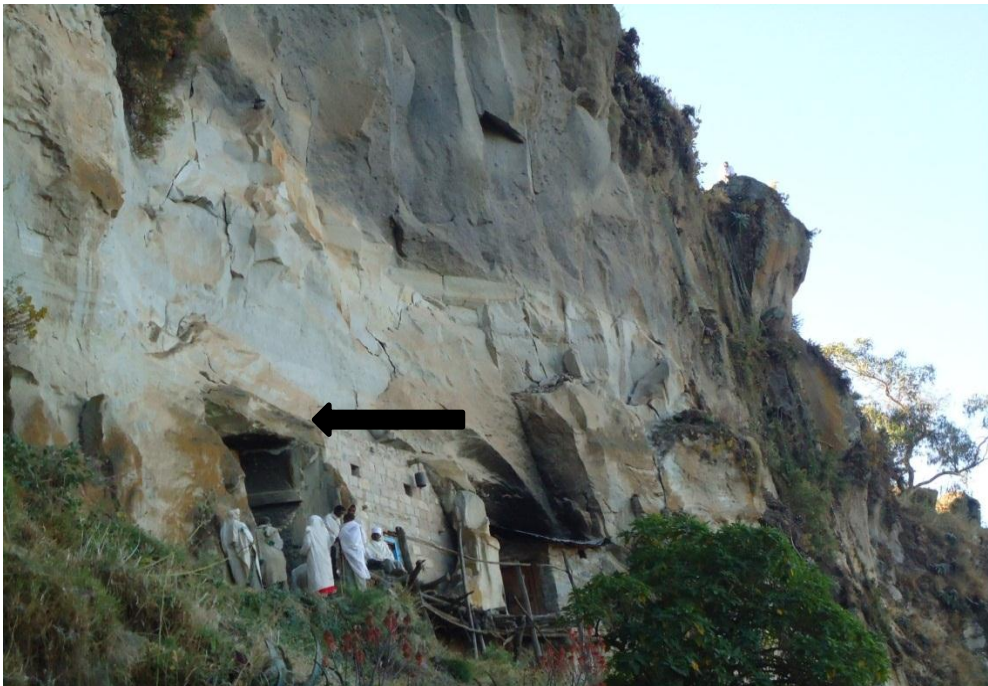
It is one of well-known rock hewn churches around Lalibela. According to local accounts it is the first work of King Lalibela. But the completion waited for another King; Neakto Le'ab. Neakuto Le'ab is nephew of King Lalibela and he is also credited for establishment of another cave church at a close distance to Lalibela.

The church was originally excavated having only a section divided into *Kidist* and *Mekides*. The *mahilet* was outside of the church. In its original structure, the church is built with three external columns, but later the columns closed with rubbles and earth to make another section (*mahilet*).

The church has 4 windows and four doors. All the wooden doors and windows are recent. The building is attached to the bed rock in three sides.

Arches supported on columns with bracket capitals are the features in the church that can be seen standing at the entrance in western face.

There are number of manuscripts written on vellum, paintings on vellum and crosses of different style made of bronze and silver.



*Figure 3. 15: Entrance to a passage that gives access to the church excavated on the top of the cliff*

### **3.1.1.11. Sarzina Mikael**

The church of Sarzina Mikael is another semi monolithic church that its construction attributed to King Kaleb in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. It is located north west of Lalibela.

The church has four external pillars. From the traces on the roof and ground of the church, there was another pillar crumbled recently. Two of the monolithic pillars are replaced with built up brick pillars in the year 1967 along with the other parts of the church crumbled in the year 1966 (*Kese gebez* Wendiminew, Pers. Comm.).

The church is attached to the bed rock on its western face and part of the northern side. Like the case of rock hewn churches of Bilbala Giyorgis and Asheten Maryma, it is not totally attached to the rock rather it is excavated from inside and supported with four pillars.

It has five pillars from inside. The church has gone through several recognizable modifications. And it has lost some of defining characters because of continued deterioration or they had been worked crudely. The inside of the church reflect crudely worked columns and capitals. The section accessed directly from the main entrance in the west is the only section where important elements in the churches discussed so far are can be exhibited.

Even the features in this section are not worked properly. There are no columns that can be identified with capitals and bases. Pillars with crudely worked arched structures support thick roof. Arches formed in recent times like the one worked on the entrance to another section is reflection of modifications on important elements of the church.

The doors have elements common in other rock hewn churches. The doors are recessed to form frames in two orders with random monkey heads. The southern door is inside a small porch lower than the main building. The feature is similar with a small porch of semi monolithic church of Bilbala Giyorgis. Original window openings are worked with little care. Wooden fillings inserted into original windows are recent.

The second section of the church has lost the original rock roof and replaced with corrugated iron sheet. This part of the church is highly affected from ground water infiltration. The sanctuary is separated from this section by brick wall.



*Figure 3. 16: renewed part of the church, eastern facade*

Traces at the base of recently built, brick walled, eastern façade of the church give an impression that the church had engaged columns. But in the context that all of the rock hewn churches in Lasta, (especially rock hewn churches in Bilbala area) have no such features; it is less probable that engaged columns were used in this church.

Compared to the church of Bilbala Kirkos, with elaborated niches, it is possible that they formed as projecting structure of niches.

The church is 16 x 11.6 meter and 4.62 meter high. This includes the renewed part which immersed deep into the original building. The renewed part of the church is covered with corrugated iron roof.

#### **3.1.1.12. Yimrehane Kiristos**

This church is mentioned here only to provide a relatively complete picture of rock churches in Lasta and to look briefly into the styles; otherwise discussing details of the church would be repeating the descriptions given elsewhere in literatures.

Alvares was the first European to visit the church. In his account he gave description of the church and possibly found a source of raw materials for the church. Yimrehane Kiristos is the only rock church, in Lasta, mentioned along with the rock hewn churches of Lalibela in Alvares's Account (Beckingham and Huntingford 1961). Considerable numbers of researches are conducted on the church since then. The church is mentioned for its resemblance to the monastery church of Debre Damo (Buxton; 1947 and Gerster 1970).

The church is situated in huge basalt cave. The cave accommodates the church and another building (palace of Yirehane Kiristos). Yimrehane kiristos built these huge structures during his 40 years reign. His commitment to religious causes made him recognized as saint (Mengistu 2011). The church incorporates many features from the built up church of the Debre Damo. Monkey head (an important element in the Axumite architecture), framed doors and windows, varying window fillings are few elements show resemblance to the church of Debre Damo. The monkey heads at

Yimrehane Kiristos are widely used on windows and door frames. The inside of the church is lavishly decorated. Frescos cover almost every part of the church.



*Figure 3. 17: Cave Church of Yimrehane Kiristos; northern facade*

### **3.1.2. Discussion**

#### **3.1.2.1. Summary of types of rock churches in Lasta**

Based on materials from which they are built and method of construction or excavation, rock churches under study can be classified into two major groups; rock hewn and built up cave churches. Rock hewn churches again divided into monolithic and semi-monolithic. Built up cave churches are churches built under the protective roof of caves.

Genete Maryam and Kenkenit Mikael are the only monolithic rock hewn churches. Rock hewn churches of Bilbala Kirkos, Bilbala Giyorgis, Arbatu Ensesa, Asheten Maryam and Sarzina Mikael are semi monolithic churches with varying attachments to bed rocks. Bilbala Giyorgis, Sarzina Mikael and Asheten Maryam are relatively similar in the way they are excavated. All of (the three) churches have southern façade completely freed from the main rocks. In the case of Sarzina Mikael additional

two faces are partially (northern façade) and totally (eastern façade) exposed to light. The eastern faced of the church of Asheten Maryam is partly detached.

The other group is cave churches. The churches of Abune Yosef, Neakuto Leab, Imekina Lideta Maryam, Imekina Medihanialem, Yimrehane Kiristos are cave churches. There is significant difference among the churches even in the same group. Details are discussed in the following section.

### **3.1.2.2. Discussion of Selected Elements**

Some, reasonably selected features of the churches are discussed in the following section. These features are common in rock churches in Lasta and elsewhere in Tigray. Thus, they can serve as representative data in discussing elements of most of the churches. On the other hand some features are evident only in few churches, but important to be noted.

#### ***Plan and Internal Arrangements***

According to Buxton (1971) the early and medieval church plan was dominated by simple basilica with nave and aisle. The aisles are separated by longitudinal colonnades bearing either lintels or arches. Similar arrangement characterize built up and rock hewn churches of Lasta.

Almost all of the rock hewn and built up cave churches are arranged into two aisles and nave in basilica style. In the built up cave churches like Immekina Lideta Mariam and Medihanialem and rock hewn church of Genete Maryam naves are identified with vaulted roof, while two aisles in each churches have low and plain roof. The three churches of Bilbala area; Bilba Giyorgis, Bilbla Kirkos and Arbatu Ensessa reflect similarities in the way lintels and arches are used. Lintels cover inter-

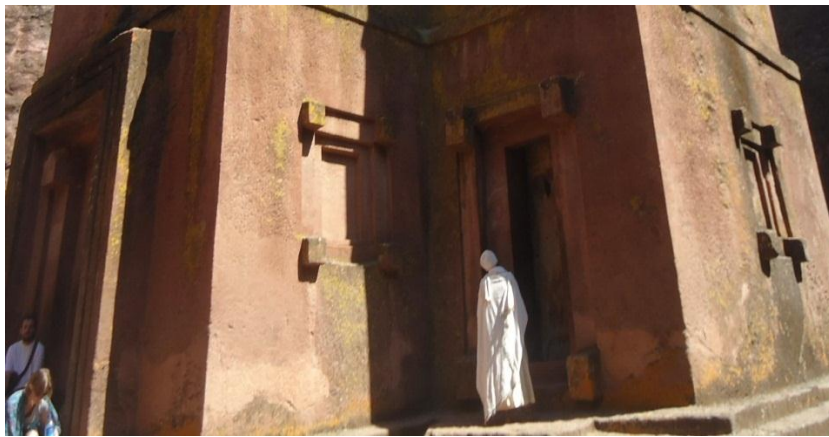
columnar space from entrances to sanctuaries of the churches, while arches connect the colonnades which are positioned to the left and right of the nave space. Lintels are used along with arches in these churches, but lintels are totally missing in the church of Genete Maryam. According to Buxton there are traces of arches on stelae at Aksum but there are no indications that they were used as essential elements in pre-Christian times. Apparently, the introduction of arches came in Christianity, which in turn considered as basilican style (Buxton 1947). But resemblance of the arches of the stelae to those in the churches gives an impression that it is less probable that they were not imitated from the stelae. Arches are integral elements in both built up and rock hewn churches. They are extensively used, where lintels are scarce, in the rock churches of Lasta. Blind arches are also seen applied on roofs (Bete-Medihanialem and Genete Maryam), facades (Bete Meskel and Bilbala Giyorgis) and different parts of interiors of many churches in Lasta. But common features like “apsed” sanctuary (as professionals prefer to call semi-circular eastern end of church), distinct narthex and Transept among other elements in basilica style are not evident in most of the churches. The sanctuary in these churches is rectangular, similar to the overall plan of the churches.

In the case of churches of Bilbala Kirkos and Genete Marim the base of the churches raises above ground level. The church of Bilbala Kirkos has elaborated plinth. The steps at the entrance of the western façade cover the height of the plinth.

### ***Windows***

Two types of windows are witnessed on the walls of these churches. There are open windows with varying shape, size and window fillings. The others are blind windows; which are either recessed on walls forming square or no recess on walls but identified

only with features known from other churches. A blind window on the western façade of Arbatu Ensesa is a good example for the second group of blind windows. At this church a plain surface of wall has only monkey heads; but the technique is applied on the wall of Bete Giyorgis at Lalibela with recesses forming square.



*Figure 3. 18: Comparison of false windows of Bete Giyorgis (above) and feature on eastern facade of Arbatu Ensesa (below)*



Windows are filled with varying materials. Wood and pierced metals are widely used in built up churches. On the other hand window fillings are worked on framed space of the windows, on wall of the churches, in the case of rock hewn churches. Lattices are applied on windows of some rock hewn churches like Genete Maryam and Bilbala

Kirkos. Such window fillings are mainly used for safety purposes. At the church of Sarzina Mikael recent wooden windows with frames, which allows opening and closing windows, are inserted into roughly worked original openings.

Window fillings are also different in their design. But cruciform window fillings are widely used. The explanation for cruciform window fillings goes beyond decorative purposes. As the sign of the cross is believed to have the power to avert evil, cross design are placed in windows to protect the churches against evil spirits (Heldman and Munro-Hay 1993).

A window filling with two arches and decorative panel on two windows of Debre Damo is repeated with modification on windows of Yimrehane Kiristos (Buxton 1947). The same feature is also used at Bete Medihanialem and Genete Maryam.



*Figure 3. 19: Twin arcades; the churches of Genete Maryam (right) and Yimrehane Kiristos (left)*

### ***Doors***

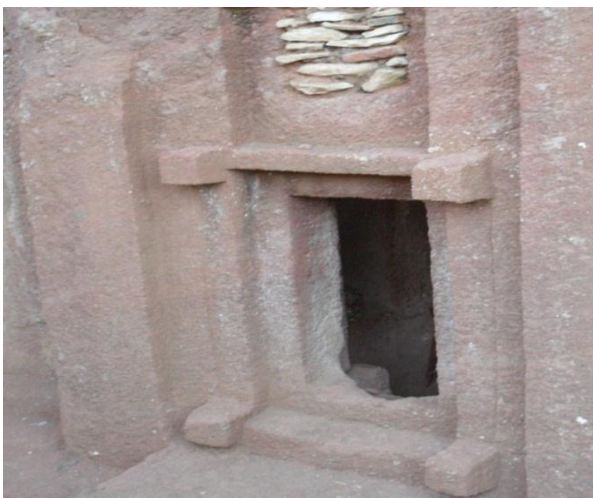
There is striking similarities among the doors of built up and rock hewn churches. Timbers are used in built up cave churches like Yimrehane Kiristos and Imekina Medihanialem. Vertical and horizontal timbers are inserted into rectangular door

space. At every junction wooden monkey heads are slotted. The monkey heads are inserted to strengthen (as binder) the pieces not attached to each other.

The frames are worked in the same fashion in rock hewn churches. The frames are formed in recess on doors. Every element is executed in the way they are implemented in built up churches. Even the monkey heads projecting inward of built up churches are seen imitated in most of rock hewn churches.



*Figure 3. 20: Comparison of doors of built up and rock hewn churches; the church of Imekina Medihanialem (above) and Bilbala Kirkos (below)*



The combinations of elements in door construction are mostly repeated in some of the windows of these churches.

### *Columns*

Two types of columns are common in these churches. These are square and cruciform, in section, columns. The columns support either lintels or arches. Arches are widely used elements in these churches. The columns in rock hewn churches are worked along with the other parts of the church hewn from the rock and attached to floor and ceiling of churches. But in the case of built up churches monolithic rock shafts with varying wooden elements are applied.



*Figure 3. 21: Capitals supporting arches in the church of Yimrehane Kiristos (above) and lintels rested on wooden capitals in the church of Imekina Medihanialem (below)*



Capitals in these churches vary in shape and arrangement. Bracket capitals are commonly used types of capitals. Such type of capitals is widely used with arches. But one or more bracket capitals, that project from walls or placed on column, support lintels in churches like Imekina Medihanialem. Capitals in built up churches are

arranged symmetrically. In most of the cases capitals are wooden which rest on monolithic stone shafts. Bracket capitals in the church of Bilbla Kirkos are worked above cubic ones.

Uneven arrangement of capitals in rock hewn churches seems that they are used either for decorative purposes or mere imitation of elements of built up churches in rock hewn churches (Buxton 1947).

### *Dome*

Dome is a feature evident only in few churches. In fact domes are not widely used as the case in rock churches of Tigray. Only two churches – rock hewn church of Bilbala Kirkos (a small cupola) and built up cave church of Imekina Medihanialem - have domes placed above the sanctuary.

According to Buxton (1971) in Ethiopia domes are placed above the sanctuary and they are constructed up on a frame work of curve radial timber meeting at the apex in a boss. Extra domes, in other parts of churches other than sanctuary, exist in some churches. Multiple domes are used in some rock churches of Tigray.

The cupola in the church of Bilbala Kirkos is a smaller and it is without ribs and boss. Only part of it rests on pendentive. It was probably painted for there is sign that it was covered with plaster. The other dome, above the sanctuary in the church of Imekina Medihanialem, is covered with plaster from the outside and decorated with mural from inside. Only wooden boss is visible.

Domes in built up churches integrate ribs with elaborated boss. These features are imitated in the same way, for instance, on multiple rock domes of Debre TSION (Gerster 1970; Buxton 1971).

## *Friezes*

This feature is one of decorative elements used in both built up and rock hewn churches. But there is variation in the way they are used. In built up churches friezes are combination of elements. Framed squares accompanied by monkey heads and carved or painted wooden panels characterize friezes in built up churches. Timbers are used as a prime element in built up churches. Monkey heads are worked in the way they are applied on door and window frames, but not necessarily inserted into joints of frames. Debre Damo and Yimrehane Kiristos are churches which show great resemblance to each other in the way friezes are used and serve as good example how different elements of friezes integrate in built up churches. The same styles are used in the church of Imekina Medihamialelem.



*Figure 3. 22: Friezes in the church of Imekina Medihanialem; from central nave area*

Friezes in rock hewn churches are imitation of features in built up churches. The features are carved on solid rock exactly as they are assembled in built up churches.

Friezes are evident only in built up churches of Yimrehane Kiristos and Imekina Medihanialem.

### *Wall*

Walls of built up and rock structures of Pre-Christian times reflect three important components. Rubbles with earth mortar sometimes covered with plasters reinforced with timber beams cover longitudinal surface of the walls. The other features are pieces of timber used as binders on door and window frames (Buxton 1947). These techniques appeared on the stelea at Axum and it shows striking similarity with built up churches of later period. All the features mentioned above are manifested in built up church of Debre Damo.

Another church where the method seen applied more precisely is built up cave church of Yimrehane Kiristos.



*Figure 3. 23: Wall structures of three built up churches; Debre Damo<sup>7</sup> (left) Yimrehane Kiristos (right) and Imkekina Medihanialem (below)*

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<sup>7</sup>Source: <http://www.traveladventures.org/continents/africa/debre-damo-monastery03.shtml>



The church of Imekina Medihanialem also resembles the two. In this church wooden beams are replaced with dressed stones, while timber beams are used in the church of Yimrehane Kiristos in the fashion they are used in built up church of Debre Damo. Monkey heads which are widely used on walls of known built up and rock hewn churches are not evident in any of the churches in the Lasta group or rock hewn churches of Lalibela.

In the Axumite structures (both in Pre-Christian and Christian Axum) monkey heads are used in two ways. Rectangular monkey heads slotted into door and window frames and round monkey heads inserted into walls, above horizontal wooden beams. These features are used as binders in built up churches. But the methods are seen copied in rock hewn churches of Tigray and Lasta (Buxton 1947; Buxton and Matthews 1974; Munro-Hay 1991).

The elements are represented in projections and recesses in rock hewn churches. The rubble and earth mortar elements are represented in projections and recesses are copy of timber beam. The church of Bete-Amanuel at Lalibela is rock hewn church that clearly reflects how the technique is applied in rock hewn churches. Monkey heads on wall are the only elements missing on the walls of this church.

Signs of the method are evident on the walls of Kenkenit Mikael and Arbatu Ensesa. But all elements do not exist. In fact projections are the only features represented on the walls of these churches.



*Figure 3. 24: Rock hewn church of Bete Amanuel*

### ***Paintings***

Cave churches of Imekina Medihanialem, Lideta Maryam and Yimrehane Kiristos and rock hewn churches of Genete Maryam and Bilbala Kirkos are churches with lavishly painted interiors.

Fresco, painting applied on surfaces covered with plaster, is commonly used painting method in these churches. Few painted churches are those covered with plaster and vice versa.

The decorations on the walls and columns generally differ from decorations on the ceilings of the churches. Walls and columns are decorated with paintings of saintly figures, animal and secular scenes, while ceilings largely possess geometric designs painted in colours in three built up rock churches and two rock hewn churches.

Varieties of designs showing greater resemblance to each other cover the ceilings of cave churches of Imekina Medihanialem, Imekina Lideta Maryam and the church of Yimrehane Kiristos. On the other hand most of rock hewn churches, not painted, possess two or more crosses carved on ceilings of nave and aisles.

### **3.1.2.3. Cultural continuity in rock church tradition**

Reference to cultural continuity between Axum and the later periods must consider close look on archaeological evidences rather than geographical (regional classification). It seems more appropriate when it comes to studies on rock church tradition of the country. As it has been suggested in literatures (Buxton 1947; Lindahl, 1969; Plant 1977; Munro-Hay 1991; Finneran 2007) styles and architectural elements are results of combination of local and outside influences. The influences can be seen in terms of internal arrangement of the churches, individual elements and overall styles. Classification integrated these aspects seems more reasonable to show cultural continuity between different periods.

As it is indicated in the previous section the dates of rock churches in Lasta ranges from the 6<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century. But the 6<sup>th</sup> century (based on local accounts) is the date suggested for the establishment of more than seven churches in Lasta. None of the churches are dated using scientific methods. As a result any interpretation cannot provide a complete picture of chronology and it makes difficult to identify the methods of building introduced, modified and discarded through time.

Relaying on the dates from traditional accounts, which can at least allow making tentative statement, most of the churches this study covered precede the churches in the Lalibela group (the eleven rock hewn churches). Thus, these churches reflect earlier traditions in rock church development.

It is possible that rock hewn churches of Lalibela modelled or adopted elements from these churches. Hence, cultural continuity reflected in rock church tradition is development and refinement of styles through time rather than a sudden appearance of the same methods in the later period.

Rock churches of Lasta embrace elements known in earliest built up and rock churches widely distributed in Tigray. There is strong relation and observable continuity in the way doors, windows, walls and friezes (among other elements) are worked. The development of rock church tradition in Lasta is product of technology advanced over extended time and is representative of methods witnessed in different periods.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **4. Heritage Management and Tourism of these churches**

This part of the study focuses on discussion of heritage and Tourism management aspects. Some of movable and non-movable heritages of the churches, current state of the churches (focuses on conservation) and overall management activities are discussed in heritage management part. The existing trend in tourism development and potentials of the churches are the other aspects addressed in this section. The interplay between heritage management and tourism is also shown.

Heritages are means by which communities express themselves and conserve their culture, belief, history and many other aspects of their life to transfer them to the next generation. Cultural heritages are important as sources of valuable scientific and historical information. Socio-cultural, economic, political, historical and aesthetical values are most often associated with heritages and conservation issues.

Some of cultural heritages of the country are among prized traces of ancient civilizations. Ethiopia has nine natural and cultural heritages registered by UNESCO as world heritages. Among these are rock hewn churches of Lalibela. As a result the churches benefited from the recognition they acquired. They are among better conserved, researched, promoted and visited sites in the country. The advantages are not confined to the eleven churches of Lalibela. Rather it helped the effort of promotion of few other churches located at close distance to Lalibela. Details of cultural heritage management and Tourism aspects are presented in the following sections.

#### **4.1. Intangible and Tangible Heritage of these churches**

For centuries, Ethiopian orthodox churches served as guardians of heritages directly and indirectly related to them. And they continued to play important roles of conserving tangible and intangible heritages of the country. Since the introduction of Christianity to the country Churches functioned as museums, libraries and educational centers.

##### **4.1.1. Intangible heritages of these churches**

*The intangible cultural heritage is manifestation of inter alia in the following domains: (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; (b) performing arts; (c) social practices, rituals and festive events; (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; (e) traditional craftsmanship. (UNESCO: Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003; article 2).*

Intangible heritages of the churches include spiritual songs performed in ritual ceremonies and the whole ritual practices, legends, deeds (“*gedils*”) of kings, saints, oral traditions regarding establishment of the churches, festivals and other aspects which are directly or indirectly related to the churches. These heritages add meaning to the churches beyond building values. The presence of these elements justifies the very existence of the churches.

**Oral traditions;** as the dates and the stories regarding the construction of the churches are highly depended on oral tradition and legends the importance of these heritages is more than their mere presence as intangible heritages of the community. Besides their

place in the community as reflection of their cultures and ways of telling their history, any study cannot ignore the role of these elements in the attempt to study the churches. Oral traditions are also important sources of data for settlement and political history of the community.

Oral traditions related to the churches focus on dates, the founders and the processes construction of the churches. None of the churches are dated scientifically. For larger part oral traditions are the only sources regarding when of the construction of the churches.

**Rituals;** include services conducted by priests and deacons every day, weekly or on special occasions (holiday, funeral, baptism). The practices involve the believers who attend the rituals or the occasions. The whole practices are conducted in the places allocated for the rituals.

It is believed that the structure and practice of present Ethiopian Liturgy is practically the same as was used in the beginning of the fourth century and throughout the succeeding centuries. Liturgical service is divided into pre-service (*Serate Kidasse*) and Anaphora (*Kidasse*). Different Anaphoras are used on different occasions. The services are conducted by priests and deacons (Marcos and Marsie 1959).

Except special events like epiphany and annual ceremonies of the churches the *tabot* stays in the churches.

Epiphany marks a special occasion as *tabotat* (Arks) of different churches come out and stay a night at a place selected for the ceremony. The *tabot* is carried by priest and moves very slowly. The crowd move with the *tabot* keeping reasonable distance. The

rituals conducted outside, on such occasions, has special place to the believers and visitors.

***Festivals***; Easter and epiphany annual celebrations attract large number of tourists and pilgrims to the town of Lalibela every year.

The festivities combine religious practices with cultural aspects of the community. People singing cultural songs, those who sing spiritual songs and Church men performing church practices accompany the *tabotat* from and to the churches.

During Easter the ritual on the rock that separate the church of Bete Maryam and Bete Medihanialem is eye catching event for visitors and gives a meaning more than celebration for pilgrims. Considerable number of people attends the ceremony starting midnight; others stay there all night long.

The festivities are not confined to the final day celebration at Lalibela. Bilbala Giyorgis, Bilbala Kirkos and Yimrehane Kiristos are churches where celebrations take place. On the other hand each churches host visitors and believers during annual celebrations on the days dedicated to the church's patron saint, martyrs. The practices follow the same trend as in any formal ritual practices in other churches. For instance the day 23 is dedicated to martyr St. George and its annual celebration on *Maizia* at the church of Bilbala Giyorgis is attended by huge number of visitors and believers. It is same at the church of Genete Maryim on 21<sup>st</sup> of January and 21<sup>st</sup> of November in other churches with Maryam Ark in the church. Such ceremonies are largely attended by the local people.

**Church Education;** before the introduction of modern education church education served as the only way of learning basic skills in languages. It ranges from learning basic skills of reading and writing to ‘*kine*’ (poetry). Many Ethiopians passed through different phases of church education.

The education has also huge importance in keeping endangered elements. For instance churches are places where “*geez*”, a language which has important place in Ethiopian history, is widely used as a medium of communication.

**Other intangible heritages;** other intangible aspects related to the churches include dance, music and ceremonies of the community settled around the churches. These provide an opportunity to tourists to experience authentic culture of the community. Cultural ceremonies like “*Ashenda*” and “*Buhe*” have an important place in the society. These annual ceremonies are considered as typical expression of the community’s culture. Songs and materials used to celebrate these occasions are unique to the ceremonies and sometimes to the community itself. These ceremonies are among cultural practices which attract tourists to the area.

Songs and performing related to events like wedding are important aspects that interest tourists. Weddings conducted in the churches are accompanied with formal ceremonies in churches.

#### **4.1.2. Tangible Heritages**

There is strong connection between intangible heritages discussed above and tangible heritages in the churches. Tangible heritages in these churches include Arks, Icon paintings, crosses, *Tsinatsil* (sistrum), *Mekuamia*, *Kebero* (Drum), gifts from different

people of differing ranks and many others. These heritages are brought into churches either for ritual services or simply kept as heritages of the churches.

**Tabot (Ark);** Ark holds the central position of the worship in Ethiopian Orthodox Church. According to tradition the original Ark is believed to be brought from Jerusalem by Menelik I, son of King Solomon and the queen of Sheba, to Axum (Budge 2000; Munro-Hay 2005). The Ark is believed to be in the church of Tsion Maryam at Axum. None one is allowed except an appointed monk. The monk is granted with the right to enter into the place where the Ark is kept and guard it.

Tabot in any church is referred to the saint or Martyr to whom the church is dedicated. But there are circumstances two or more Arks are kept in a church. For instance the church of St. George at Bilbala has the Ark of St. George and St. Marry in separate sections. *Tabotat* are kept in sanctuaries (*Mekides*) of churches. In most cases sanctuaries are situated eastern direction of churches. Being the place where the Ark is kept, it is accessed only by priest. It is placed on *Manbar* (Altar) and covered with cloth.

**Crosses;** crosses are used in numerous ceremonies, performances, and festivals. They are different in size, design, material they are made from and the purposes they are used.

Based on their size and purposes there are three types of crosses. Processional, Hand and Neck crosses. Processional crosses are large crosses. Such crosses used for the blessing of the congregation and water for baptism. During annual ceremonies and special occasions, priests take processional crosses out of churches and rise above the head of the crowd. In most cases the base of processional crosses have hollow. In churches like Ne'akuto Le'ab and Asheten Mariam priests bring out processional

crosses to show for tourists. Hand Crosses are smaller than processional crosses and held by priests and used for blessing. When a priest is approached by a believer he holds out the cross for him or her to kiss. Neck crosses are small crosses of different shape. Such crosses are tied round the neck of a person when he/she gets baptized. Wood, silver and iron are materials widely used to produce crosses.



*Figure 4. 1: A priest holding processional cross; at the church of Neakuto Le'ab*

**Musical Instruments;** Most of musical instruments in churches are also used for secular ceremonies. Kirar, *Begena*, *Masinko*, *Kebero* and *Tsinatsil* are musical instruments employed in spiritual songs. Some of them appear in slightly differing variants. *Kebero* (Drum) is a musical instrument used for both spiritual and secular ceremonies. Three types of drums are common in Ethiopia; *Kebero*, *Atamo* and *negarit*. *Kebero* here refers to a medium size musical instrument used in churches. It is played by tapping the two ends of differing size with hands. *Tsinastil* (sistrum) is

small hand held instrument. When shaken the small rings attached to thin metal move to produce sound. *Tsinasil* and *Kebero* are the two musical instruments widely used in churches. These instruments are used during liturgy and other rituals and ceremonies. Sound produce by these instruments is determined by the nature of the ritual.



*Figure 4. 2: Kebero at the church of Neakuto Le'ab*

**Manuscripts;** Ethiopian Orthodox churches are among historical places of the country where one can find centuries old Manuscripts, which held an important position in the studies of church and the country's history. For instance the museum at Lalibela reflects important role the churches played in preserving heritages. Church materials take the lion share of the museum's collection. The museum is reach in centuries old crosses, manuscripts, paintings on vellum and other collections. Some of the manuscripts are found only in Ethiopia. Manuscripts of Kings' and saints' "*gedils*"/ deeds and manuscripts used for church services like liturgy and for daily prayer are found in these churches. I had the chance to see some manuscripts during field work at Asheten Maryam and Imekina Lideta Maryam.



*Figure 4. 3: A priest holding manuscript at the church of Asheten Maryam*

#### **4.2. Heritage management of these churches**

For centuries the churches remained hidden in the mountains of Lasta. One of the factors facilitated for better conservation of these churches is geography of the area. Due to their location, some of the churches escaped from natural and manmade causes of destruction. Even Ahmed Gran's campaign to northern part of the country, which eventually discovered the rock churches of Lalibela, failed to trace the churches of Lasta. Ahmed Gran's army suffered from cold and rain while the terrain tested their patience (Pankhurst 1982). On the other hand regrettable damages are recorded because of inaccessibility of the churches.

Heritage management activities include documentation, conservation, promotion and research. These aspects of heritage management are pillars in safeguarding and making heritages known to the general public and academic community. Management

activities are expected to include the buildings and other tangible and intangible heritages related to the churches.

#### **4.2.1. Documentation**

Documentation of cultural heritages is indispensable, for purposes of identification, protection, interpretation, and physical conservation of heritages. Documenting movable and non-movable heritages gives data regarding the state of the churches. This in turn paves ground for conservation activities on the churches. Recording heritages in the churches is an important way of fighting illicit trafficking of heritages.

*Inventories constitute primary resource databases for scientific study and research. The compilation of inventories should therefore be regarded as a continuous, dynamic process. It follows that inventories should comprise information at various levels of significance and reliability, since even superficial knowledge can form the starting point for protectional measures (ICOMOS Charter for the Protection and Management of the Archaeological Heritage 1990; article 4).*

Keeping record of the churches (as a building) and movable and non-movable heritages helps researchers, conservators and developers to decide where to start their works.

There are attempts made to document rock churches in Lasta and movable heritages in the churches by Culture and Tourism office of Lalibela. But the works are not organized in the way they give complete picture of the churches and the heritages in the churches. Except for the churches of Lalibela, there are no techniques of recording deterioration rates and details of maintenances on the churches. Though there are few

attempts made to prepare written reports indicating status of few churches of Lasta, well organized and reports, which covers all of the churches, are not conducted so far.

Recording movable and non-movable heritages of most of the churches is a major step taken by Culture and Tourism office of Lalibela Town. Documentation of heritages done in most of the churches since 2001 E.C. provided a good ground for management of the heritages. But reports of documented heritages lack details.

No.	Name of the church	Documented movable heritages				Kebele	Year of documentat ion
		Paintings	<i>Brana</i> books	Other heritages	Total		
1	Nekuto Le'ab	18	4	133	235	03	2001
2	Ashetem Maryam	7	57	67	131	03	2001
3	Yimrehane Kiristos	16	54	90	160	01	2002
4	Imekina Medihanialem	33	24	2	59	04	2001
5	Abune Yosef	3	10	27	40	016	2002
6	Kenkenit Mikael	1	28	22	51	012	2003

*Table 4. 1: Movable heritages in six churches (Source; Lalibela Town Culture and Tourism Office 2011)*

#### **4.2.2. Conservation**

Conserving the churches and heritages related to them requires not only knowledge, skill, competency and understanding of methods of conservation but the culture itself to ensure these cultural values are retained. Conservation tasks which ranges from

documentation and guarding to physical interventions like maintenances and restorations requires implementation of appropriate methods and skills.

Conserving heritages is not a task confined to professionally managed developments and implementation of sophisticated techniques of conservation rather it involves the community as a guardian of the heritages. Preventive measures which involve the immediate community play an important role in conserving tangible and intangible heritages of these churches. Fences and modern enclosures recently built for the churches of Imekina Lideta Maryam and Imekina Medihanialem can serve good example of community based heritage conservation.

Compared to other aspects of heritage management, the conservation aspect is stagnant. Observable tasks conducted on the churches so far is shelters which cover the roofs of almost every rock hewn churches. From twelve churches this study covers eight of them are covered with corrugated Iron sheet. The shelters are even criticized for ignoring aspects related to aesthetic values of the churches and do not address geological and geotechnical properties of the rocks from which the churches are hewn (Asfawossen et al 2008).

Patching cracks, restoring paintings, and many other restoration methods are witnessed in most of the churches. Except few cases there are no records of restoration activities i.e. techniques and materials used, technicians employed and the role of the community and many other aspects took share in restoration and maintenance tasks. In fact handful restoration tasks in the churches are conducted under supervision of administrators of each church. In such cases traditional methods and materials are employed.

Churches like Sarzina Mikael undergone through major maintenances activities. This church is in critical condition even after maintenance conducted in the year 1967(*Kes Wendimenew Bekele Pers. Comm.*). In the church of Imekina Medihanialem wooden pillars are employed to support crumbling roof. In the church of Bilbala Kirkos cracks are filled with earth. In most of the cases traditional methods served as only way to slow the pace of destruction.

Preventive conservation and maintenance play an important role in protecting the churches. Taking physical measures to safeguard the churches before destructions result total or partial loss of heritages is recommendation of international and local conservators. Preparedness for post destruction maintenances is another aspect of conservation. The final stage in heritage conservation is emergency operations and reconstruction programs.

Institutional conservation of the churches is very recent. Though there are observable conservation tasks conducted by Lalibela Town Culture and Tourism Office, most of the churches maintenances are conducted without necessary preliminary assessments and the personnel employed are not qualified for the tasks. But remarkable conservation activities are conducted with limited resource and manpower.

The task of implementing proven methods with qualified personnel results better conservation of the churches. In other words it is well organized and well managed conservation activities which results sustenance of the churches.

#### **4.2.3. Promotion of these Heritages**

Promotion plays a pivotal role in supporting conservation efforts, bring about public understanding and increase tourist flow to the sites.

The notion of promotion of heritages is not exclusively confined to the task of introducing the heritages to Ethiopian and foreign tourists. It includes preparing written reports on the state of heritages and disseminates information which enables the community living around the churches and the general public understand the heritages better. On the other hand like any other heritage management activities promotion of cultural heritage should be combined effort of the public, scholars, governmental and non-governmental organizations and the community. It is collective efforts of different organization and the public bring about better promotion of the heritages.

Introduction of electronic media into the promotion sector is a great leap in the efforts to make heritages known to the general public which in turn create platform for the overall heritage management works. It provided good way for people to share their experiences within short time and in very easy way. Internet with its multi facets of communication facilitated easy way of uploading photos, videos and shares their experiences in written form.

Except few of rock churches, most of them are not accessible to tourists in some cases even to the local people. Promotion on webs and through electronic Medias addressed few rock churches like Yimrehane Kiristos, Genete Maryam, Bilbala Kirkos and Bilbala Giyorgis.

In few months, EBS<sup>8</sup> has done great deal of task in introducing the country's heritages. An organized trips to the churches of Lalibela and other historical places

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<sup>8</sup> EBS (Ethiopian Broadcast Service) is a privately held media established in 2008 in Silver Spring, Maryland, USA. Launched its broadcasting service on Arab sat on September 10, 2010. (source: [http://ebstv.tv/main/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=46&Itemid=84](http://ebstv.tv/main/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=46&Itemid=84))

helped efforts to introduce heritages hidden in mountains and inaccessible areas of the country. Few rock churches of Lasta also favored from the documentaries of EBS.

The contribution of short documentaries by ETV and Regional Television Channels and private and government radios is undeniable. But little efforts are made to produce works based on researches and address churches other than known elsewhere on the internet and other Medias. Most programs on rock churches are focused on the churches of Lalibela and few others in Tigray.

On the other hand except on few webpages of tour operators and government institution it is difficult to find rock churches on webpages prepared to promote the churches. To make things worse institutions (Lalibela Town Culture and Tourism office) established to manage heritage management tasks have no webpages.

Printed Medias are other forms of promotion and by far the common methods as far as promotion of heritages of the country in general and the Lasta group in particular is concerned. Documents on the churches are available since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Built up rock church of Yimrehane Kiristos was the only church mentioned, for the first time, along with rock hewn churches of Lalibela in Alvares's travel account (Beckingham and Huntingford 1961). Researches and travel accounts which make frequent reference to Alvares's account began to enrich their accounts by adding unknown sites. Increasing of publications on rock churches without doubt helped promotion efforts. For instance publications on rock churches of Lalibela brought about success in registration of the churches as world heritages. This coupled with other factors increased tourist flow to these churches.

When it comes to other rock churches of Lasta promotion tasks are very slow. Promotion using printed Medias like Magazine, newspaper, brochures and others is

rare. In fact most of them are at least mentioned or in some cases described well, but the records are not available in the way everyone access them. Besides, the earliest records on the churches are available only in Italy and French Languages, which makes it difficult even for majority of Ethiopian researches.

In any case attention should be given to the promotion aspect of heritage management and it must be conducted in the way it integrates tangible and intangible heritages. The overall promotion efforts so far are not enough compared to the potentials of the churches. Planned and organized programs through different Medias are the key to unleash potentials of the churches. Promotion is also another way of supporting conservation and research activities.

Tourism is determined by heritage management activities on the churches. Management aspects i.e. documentation, conservation, promotion and research<sup>9</sup> have direct relation with tourism. Tourism as a product of these elements is discussed in the following section.

### ***Tourism***

Tourism comprises the activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes (United Nations and World Tourism Organization 2004). Thus, tourism include the processes (activities) and outcomes arising from the relationships and the interactions among tourists, host governments, host communities and surrounding environments that are involved in attracting and hosting of visitors (Goeldner and Ritchie 2009). According to WTO, tourism's contribution to

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<sup>9</sup> Discussion of research activities is not given here because research, as an integral aspect of heritage management, is addressed directly and indirectly throughout the text.

worldwide GDP is estimated at some 5% (WTO 2011). In some countries the tourism sector contributes considerable part of the GDP.

In countries like Ethiopia where the economy is highly depended on agricultural sector, the contribution of tourism is enormous in diversifying the economy. The presence of heritages (natural and cultural heritages) which can be utilized to this end, make such statements sound and achievable. The sector is able to generate both income and employment, relatively cost effectively (Picard and Robinson 2006).

Based on the data from Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Adem (2008) states that the contribution of tourism to Ethiopian GDP is low when compared to other East African countries. For example, in 1996 tourism contribution in Ethiopia was about its 0.5 % GDP whereas its contribution to Kenya was 5.1 % of its GDP in the same year. Even though there is an increase in tourist flow in recent years, much works need to be done to bring about better utilization of country's heritages.

### ***Cultural Tourism***

Cultural tourism denotes tourism based on cultural heritages. It involves visiting monuments or sites as well as experiences and interaction with local people. Historical and heritage tourism are also used to describe cultural tourism. Cultural tourism integrates both intangible and tangible cultural heritages of a community. It seems the role of cultural tourism for countries development is noted more than ever (Picard and Robinson 2006). Heritages have the power to generate funds through tourism. Funds generated through tourism support conservation activities on heritages and benefit communities living around heritages in many ways, which in turn results recognizable contribution to country's economy.

As it is indicated in preceding sections rock churches of Lasta are among few heritages of the country with huge potential of Tourism. But because of absence of system which can bring about better utilization of these heritages, the churches remained hidden to foreign and Ethiopian visitors. Underdeveloped infrastructure, very little effort made to promote the churches and many other factors created hindrances to the sector.

Development of the sector brings about multi-facet benefit to the community related to the churches. Due to the utilization of these heritages, many new jobs will be generated in the tourism sector and as a result the figures are even more impressive. Hotels and other service giving sectors benefit from the sector. The influence of well-planned and well-managed local tourism programs extends to improving the local economy and enhancing the quality of life for local residents.

Even in the current trend, one can see expansion of sectors depended on the heritages. The number of tourist service giving establishments increased with increased tourist flow to the area. According to the data from Lalibela Town Culture and Tourism Office (2011) there are 17 hotels, 6 pensions, 12 restaurants. The hotels have 534 employees. While 12 restaurants employed 22 male and female employees.

Name of the church	Number of Tourists			Earning in Birr			Total in Birr
	Domes tic	Foreign	Total	'Bete Kihinet', Museum and Video			
				Domestic	Foreign	Total	
Lalibela	14149	35169	49318	30600	12582750	12613350	77392091
Asheten Maryam	-	4653	4653		469050	469050	469050
Neakuto Leab	-	5871	5871		593100	593100	593100
Genete Maryam	-	565	565		56500	56500	56500
Yimrehane Kiristos	-	5332	5332		804350	804350	804350
Bilbala Giyorgis	-	564	564		28250	28250	28250
Bilbala Kirkos	-	275	275		13800	13800	13800
Arbatu Ensesa	-	207	207		11800	11800	11800
Total	14149	52636	66785	30600	14559600	14590200	79368941

*Table 4. 2: Major tourist destination churches and earning of the year 2003 E.C. (source; Lalibela Town Culture and Tourism Office 2011)*

As indicated in above table, number of tourists and earning is high for rock hewn churches of Lalibela. Prominent reasons for this could be result of improvement in promotion, relatively developed infrastructure sector and presence of better tourist accommodations in the town among other factors.

The ways to rock churches like Imekina Lideta, Imekina Medihanialem, Kenkenit Mikael and Abune yosef are difficult even for mule. It takes several hours of climb to high mountains to reach to these churches. On the other hand the churches of Bilbala Giyorgis, Bilbala Kirkos, Arbatu Ensesa, and Yimrehane Kirstos are situated at, relatively, close distance to each other. Tourists who set out to visit one of the churches can visit most of them at a time. Tourists visit the churches of Arbatu Ensesa and Bilbala Giyorgis on their way to Yimrehane Kiristos, relatively known than the other three.

The cave church of Neakuto Le'ab is located at a close distance (six km) to the town of Lalibela. Few hundred meters detour from the main road that takes to the town of Lalibela from Gashena, takes to this rock church. It is the first rock church visitors (using vehicle) coming from Addis Ababa encounter. This factor without doubt made the church frequently visited rock church next to rock hewn churches of Lalibela.

The information tourist guides and other people in Lalibela provide for tourists is another factor that determines tourist flow to these churches. Tourists are provided with available information only on rock churches mentioned above. According to Sewmehon, a guide to Ethiopian tourists, (Pers. Comm.) the churches of Asheten Maryam, Neakuto Leab, Bilbala Giyorgis, Bilbala Kirkos, Arbatu Ensesa, Genete Maryam and Yimrehane Kiristos are churches recommend to tourists by their guides.

According to him some of the guides at Lalibela do not know where about of churches which are not frequently visited.

Number of tourists visited seven rock churches and tourist earning from 2002 and 2003 E.C. (part of the data is presented in the above table) are presented in the tables below for comparison.

Name of the church	Number of tourist		Earning in Birr		Total
	Domestic	Foreign	Entrance fee	Camera fee	
Asheten Maryam	-	7522	723460	4850	728310
Neakuto Le'ab	-	4235	340150	2150	342300
Genete Maryam	-	612	43050	800	43850
Yimrehane Kiristos	-	4276	506925	13400	520325
Bilbala Giyorgis	-	352	10250	-	10250
Bilbala Kirkos	-	305	17100	50	17150
Arbatu Ensesa	-	19	950	-	950
Total			1641885	21250	1663135

*Table 4. 3: Number of foreign tourists visited seven rock churches and earning of the year 2002 E.C. (source; Lalibela Town Culture and Tourism Office 2011)*

Name of the church	Number of tourists		Earning in Birr			Total
	Domestic	Foreign	Entrance fee	No. of Cameras	Camera fee	
Asheten Maryam	-	4653	465300	75	3750	469050
Neakuto Le'ab	-	5871	587100	120	6000	593100
Genete Maryam	-	565	56500	-	-	56500
Yimrehane Kiristos	-	5332	799800	91	4550	804350
Bilbala Giyorgis	-	564	28200	1	50	28250
Bilbal Kirkos	-	275	13750	1	50	13800
Arbatu Ensesa	-	207	10350	29	1450	11800
Total			1961000		15850	1976850

*Table 4. 4: Number of foreign tourists visited seven rock churches and earning of the year 2003 E.C. (Source; Lalibela Town Culture and Tourism Office 2011)*

There is increase and decrease in number of visitors at individual churches in these two consecutive years but the overall number has increased. Adding the number of tourists at each churches results repetition, because the same tourist may visit all or some of the churches. At the church of Arbatu Ensesa visitors increased from 19 to 207, but it is still least visited of the seven rock churches.

The increase in number of visitors to the church of Yimrehane Kiristos probably related to recent promotion activities. The number has also shown improvement for rock hewn churches of Bilbala Giyorgis and Arbatu Ensesa, which might be result of

increase in tourist flow to the church of Yimrehane Kiristos, The church is located at a distance of 42 km from the town of Lalibela and 12 km from Bilbala, a small kebele where the churches of Bilbala Giyorgis and Arbatu Ensessa are found. The only way (for vehicle) to the church of Yimrehane Kiristos is through Bilbala.

The two tables show results of seven tourist destination churches. There are no recorded data for other churches. In fact the data is representation of frequently visited churches. The number of tourists visited the other five churches is not given and is estimated to be less than the church of Arbatu Ensessa. Based on information from priests at the other five churches, very few tourists visit these churches

There are no numerical data given on the earning of service giving sectors i.e. hotels, restaurants, car and mule rent and other service giving sectors. But its impact is visible in terms of increased number of these tourist service giving sectors in Lalibela.

### **4.3. Challenges and prospects**

The tradition of conservation of cultural heritage through the protection of monuments, sites and related elements must be integrated in a larger strategy of sustainable management of developments on cultural heritage. In tourism context WTO has expressed sustainability as *Tourism that take full account of its current and future economic, social and environment impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host community*(UNEP and WTO 2005:12).

The need to make cultural tourism development on the churches sustainable holds the central position in safeguarding the values attached to the churches. The values can be measured in terms of the need of the host community and tourists. The existing trends in terms of sustainability of the churches are discussed in the following sections.

### **4.3.1. Challenges**

Threats to the churches can be seen in two ways. The first is physical deterioration of the churches because of manmade and natural agents. The second constitute threats to intangible heritages, for which tourism take the lion share.

#### ***Major Man-made and Natural causes of deterioration***

There are number of factors which lead to physical deterioration of heritages. Identifying the nature and scale of destructive forces helps determine intervention methods. It also enables to take measures before it results in total loss of heritages.

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. Churches like Imekina Medihanialem, Lideta Maryam and Yimrehane Kiristos are relatively better preserved. On the other hand most of the rock hewn churches are severely deteriorated largely by natural cause of deterioration.

#### ***Manmade causes***

Conscious and unconscious acts of people continued threatening cultural heritages. The destructions are directed against tangible and intangible heritages.

Trading cultural materials is ever increasing business. The business sometimes accommodates theft and illicit transfer of movable heritages into its system. Despite the presence of laws by international organization like INTERPOL and countries of the world directed towards protection of cultural heritages, the act of exporting

cultural heritages out of countries border is still a crime threatened cultural heritage (UNESCO 2006).

Illicit transfer of cultural heritages is one of and by far the most threatening problems the churches faced. Considerable numbers of Ethiopian heritages are found outside the country. Based on the data from Lalibela Town Culture and Tourism (2011) the country has 3415 illegally exported heritages in 12 countries. The larger number is in the hands of organizations.

In the context of heritage management, absence of documentation of heritages is the major factor that opens favorable condition for theft and illicit trafficking. Systematic documentations pave good way for controlling, and supporting efforts to restitute stolen heritages. According to Moges, Heritage Inventory Officer at Lalibela Town Culture and tourism Office, (Pers. Comm.) stolen heritages from rock hewn church of Mawure Estifanos are restituted with combined effort of the Office and police. He underlines the importance of documentation in the context of safeguarding heritages.

Graffiti on different parts of the churches is another factor which causes physical deterioration. Graffiti are evident in almost all of rock hewn churches. The effect of such acts in reducing aesthetic value of the churches is not taken seriously.

Tourist related problems are other forms of deterioration in the churches. For instance flash cameras are not allowed in the church of Bete Maryam while tourists are allowed to use flash in the churches of Genete Maryam and Bilbala Kirkos (these churches are rich in fresco paintings). Uniformly and reasonably applicable rules results sound management of the heritages, which in turn ensure sustainability.

Destructions related to maintenance and other conservation activities are the other factors which lead to physical deterioration of the churches. In churches like Bilbala Kirkos and Imekina Medihanialem cracks are filled with mud without any preliminary study. In fact maintenances like this are done by the local people. Besides physical deteriorations, such type of restorations also affects aesthetic values of the churches.

The community related to the churches used, managed and renewed the churches for many generations. These people are more than just another stakeholder group in heritage management. Connection to heritages or place is an important part of people's commitment to protect heritage places and values. The interaction between local administrative offices, tourists, operators and other stakeholders and the local communities is basis for healthy cultural tourism.

Administrative bodies at all levels should include the interest of the community in their legislations. Tourism should be in the frame work of respect for culture and history of the host society. In the context of economic rewards of the tourism sector; participation of local people in tourism raise questions as to whether the sector contributes to poverty alleviation in the region. In this respect the local community wants to see heritages improving their earnings.

On the other hand creating awareness among the community regarding shared ownership of the churches holds central position in creating favorable environment for heritage management activities and resultant tourism.

Problems arise when the question of owner ship and responsibilities of stake holders at different level are not clearly defined.

According to information I collected from priests, there were time when conservation activities stopped because of conflicts between the local people and church administrators and Culture and Tourism Office.

Collaboration between these groups in an integrated approach to cultural heritage management will promote greater understanding of the histories and values of the cultural landscape. It should be noted that heritages management is a shared responsibility as the ownership is a shared trait.

### *Natural Causes*

Results of studies conducted on churches Lalibela identified weathering as a major nature caused factor of deterioration. Disintegration of volcanic agglomerates and scoriae is resulted from wetting and drying cycle. Samples from weathered rock samples from Bete Abba Libanos showed concentration of salt (Delmonaco et al 2010). The effects of weathering are observable in the churches like Aba Libanos and Bete Gebrel and Rufael.

According to (Delmonco et al 2010) pedogenesis resulted from raindrops on roof of churches is dominant cause of degradation of roofs of churches like Bete Merkoreos at Lalibela. The same process coupled with biological factors resulted deterioration of roof and other parts of the church of Kenkenit Mikael. Soil formed through such process is evident on the roof of this church and it provided favourable condition for growth of plants. Scientific methods are not used to remove plants grown on churches. Churches like Arbatu Ensesa and Sarzina Mikael are highly affected from flood and raindrops seeping through roof and walls of the churches.



*Figure 4. 4: Highly degraded roof of Kenkenit Mikael*

Of all rock churches water caused deterioration is critical in the church of Sarzina Mikael. As indicated above the church had gone through maintenances. But it remained under critical condition as seeping through the roof is causing destruction of pillars (inside and outside) of the church. The current look of eastern façade and part of the southern side of the church are result of the recent renewal. Degraded original pillar from the inside and outside of the church seems not able to support the thick roof above it much longer. Soils formed on the roof of the church are indicative of seriousness of deterioration process. Cracks on the walls of the church are also sever compared to other churches. Traces left by rain water on roof, ceiling and walls of the church indicate high concentration of salt.

Rain water and resultant flood, weathering and biological causes of destruction are the most threatening natural causes in most of rock hewn churches of Lasta. While built up rock churches remained better protected in caves. From my observation nature caused deteriorations take the lion share.

### *Deterioration of paintings*

Deterioration of paintings is presented in separate section because the causes are both manmade and natural. Only few churches are adorned with fresco paintings.

*Wall paintings are an integral part of monuments and sites and should be preserved in situ. Many of the problems affecting wall paintings are linked to the poor condition of the building or structure, its improper use, lack of maintenance, frequent repairs and alterations. Also frequent restorations, unnecessary uncovering, and use of inappropriate methods and materials can result in irreparable damage. Substandard and inadequate practices and professional qualifications have led to unfortunate results (ICOMOS Principles for the Preservation and Conservation-Restoration of Wall Paintings 2003).*

Deterioration problems observed on the wall paintings of the churches are loss of plaster layers and loss of painted layers. Total loss of plaster layer is common type of deterioration in the churches of Genete Maryam and Bilbala Kirkos. Both manmade and natural causes are evident. People visiting the churches and those inter to the churches during services unconsciously destroy paintings. Paintings on columns and pilasters of churches like Genete Maryam and Bilbala Kirkos are deteriorated this way. Church materials like ‘mekuamia’, chairs and other materials are placed near columns and pilasters play the largest part of destruction as human caused destruction. Such materials deteriorate paintings when they are moved from place to place.



*Figure 4. 5: deteriorated plaster; on a column in the church of Genete Maryam*

On the other hand water seeping through roof and walls of buildings take the largest part as natural cause of destruction. Plaster layers are continuously flicking off from walls and ceiling of the churches as a result of water agency as a factor of deterioration. Restoration and painting new scenes and icons are also evident in the church of Bilbala Kirkos. Recent paintings are applied on columns of this church. These paintings differ from the rest of the paintings and can be easily identified.

#### ***Negative impacts of Tourism***

Like any other economic activity, tourism can have negative impacts on communities. There are dangers emanate from poorly managed tourism. Tourism as industry using heritages to generate incomes for private enterprises, the community and country's economy is expected to meet the objectives of sustainability. Problem arises when Market led planning tend to ignore objectives of sustainable tourism and environmental, social and cultural aspects. When tourism activities focus on ways of maximizing income of stakeholders regardless of the effect on tangible and intangible heritages, inherent quality and meaning of cultural heritages become less important than the economic motive of earning income. As a result, culture of a given

community may be modified to suit the interests of tourists and its original meaning and significance is lost. The effect of unmanaged tourism is intense on intangible heritages of a community as performances, ceremonies and traditions become a way for earning income rather than the true purposes and place these aspects in the community.

Theft and illicit trafficking of cultural heritages is another danger posed by tourism. Tourists keen to take material evidences of their visits tend to involve in illegal trade of cultural heritages. A healing cross stolen from rock hewn church of Bete Medihanialem in 1997 is indicative of seriousness of such illegal acts. The cross was smuggled to an antique dealer who sold it to a Belgian collector for USD 25,000, but eventually returned to Ethiopia in 2001(Eleni 2010).

#### ***Underdeveloped Infrastructure***

There is strong relation between development of infrastructure sector and tourism. The presence of developed infrastructure sector paves way for growth of tourism. Under developed transport sector is among the factors that created obstacle for the development of tourism in the area. Considerable number of tourists arrives to the town of Lalibela. Most of the tourists end their visit there. Only few of them are interested to visit churches that can be accessed using vehicle. Even roads to churches frequently visited churches i.e. Yimrehane Kiristos, Bilbala Giyorgis, Bilbala Kirkos, Arbatu Ensessa and Genete Maryam are not easily accessible.

#### **4.3.2. Prospects**

Increased involvement of governmental and non-governmental organizations and individuals in the promotion of the heritages is resulting observable improvements in the tourism sector.

Researches which have increased in recent years are also promising in terms of their contribution in indicating damages and recommendations of possible solution for ever increasing destruction on the heritages. The role of researches also extends to promotion of heritages. Attentions given by foreign research centers to studies on rock churches are promising and it obviously maximizing the quality in development of heritage and tourism management aspects. Researches by higher educational centers like Addis Ababa University are also helping promotion efforts.

Most of the churches are located at distances close to the town of Lalibela, which ranges from six (cave church of Neakuto Le'ab) to 60 km (Abune Yosef). But it is not more than 30 km for most of the churches. And more than half of the churches can be accessed using vehicles, though they are difficult ways. Thus, increasing research and promotion efforts can bring about increase in number of tourists, even in the present trend of infrastructure. Increase in tourist flow to the town of Lalibela is a huge advantage for other rock churches in Lasta.

## **CHAPTE FIVE**

### **5. Conclusion and Recommendation**

#### **5.1. Conclusion**

Rock churches are one of widely mentioned heritages of the country. Visitors, researchers and others who had access to the places kept records of their journey and researches. Few rock churches of Tigray and rock hewn churches of Lalibela are rock churches known to the world because of repeated references made in studies of rock structures and because of visitors keen to display what they have witnessed in the country.

Web based communication, which made dissemination of information to a very large area and people within short period of time is among the factors played important role in making the places better known. The documentations by visitors, researchers, diplomats and missionaries are now widely available on web. Even the earliest accounts are organized in the way they suit web based systems. The result of such (deliberate and non-deliberate) promotions is quite impressive. There is dramatic increase in number of tourists year after year. However, the promotions are focused on the rock hewn churches of Lalibela. Only few churches close to these churches happened to be advantageous.

Most of researches on rock churches of the area are not detailed. For instance there is no much effort exerted to establish absolute dates employing scientific methods. Eventually, scientific researches done in the context of establishing absolute dates and establishing chronology for the churches, which in turn help to conduct comparative

studies on rock churches of the country, remained recommendation of researches conducted on the churches including this research.

Lack of the necessary skills and resource are difficulties encountered in the attempts made to study these rock churches by few Ethiopian researchers. Generally most of the researches on rock churches of the area are little more than describing the churches. Only relative assessment of heritage management activities make the situations in the case of rock churches of Lalibela better.

There is a strong connection between churches built at earlier period of Christianity and other churches built and hewn in the medieval time. In fact any comparison between the churches should focus on various features the churches embrace. Based the dates from traditional sources most of rock churches in Lasta precede rock hewn churches of Lalibela. Similarities in various elements of these churches with rock and built up churches in Tigray and Lalibela make them possible bridge for rock church traditions in the Lasta and Lalibela area. The church of Genete Maryam known for resemblance it has with the Church of Bete Medihanialem can be considered as reflection of continuity of the tradition without significant difference through time.

The overall heritage management activity on the churches is the key for sustainability of these cultural heritages. Improved and integrated heritage management tasks plays significant role in developing these heritage in the way bring about tangible changes in the community and country at large. It also helps efforts to save the churches from damage.

The churches are endowed with huge tourism potentials. Various tangible and intangible heritages of the churches provide diversified experiences for tourists. Besides the churches as buildings, admired for their architectural elements, heritages

in and around the churches can be utilized for tourism development. Unleashing these potentials requires integrated effort of governmental, non-governmental institutions, individuals and the immediate community in promotion, infrastructure and other developmental projects. The churches have the potential to support development efforts in the region and country at large. This can easily be attested by evaluating the income generated from the churches of Lalibela and churches like Yimrehane Kiristos, Neakuto Le'ab and Asheten Maryam in recent years.

The churches can also play significant role in studying culture and history of the area. The churches are rich in centuries old heritages which can provide wealth of information on cultural, political, socio-economic and religious history of the area. Strong connection between state and Ethiopian Orthodox Church through the centuries is another way looking into bold contribution the churches can make.

Collective and carefully managed researches will result proper understanding of rock church tradition in the country. Establishing of chronology for rock churches based on absolute dates plays the central role in understanding architectural elements employed in churches, found in different geographical location and time frame. This in turn helps to understand the methods employed in varying contexts. Issues related with material and site selection can also be addressed this way. All these provide valuable information about history and culture of the country

## 5.2. Recommendation

- ❖ In the absence of absolute dates for the rock churches in the country, close studies of architectural attributes is of great importance. Comparative studies of these churches have the power to reveal history of developments in rock churches of the country.
- ❖ Rapidly deteriorating frescoes are among precious heritages of the churches. Studying of paintings along with other elements may support the effort to establishing absolute dates for the churches. Unless immediate actions initiated to save frescoes found only in few churches, they can be lost permanently.
- ❖ Maintenances which do not involve professional and conducted without preliminary assessments contribute for deterioration of heritages. Any maintenances and modifications affecting the churches should not be carried out without extensive scholarly investigations.
- ❖ Periodical assessments of state of the churches need to be conducted and reported to the responsible bodies and records should be kept. Keeping detailed reports, methods, materials and profile of personnel of any conservation activities (on the churches and their surrounding) is helpful for researches and conservation activities in the future.
- ❖ Immediate maintenance activities have to be initiated on churches like Sarzina Mikael and Arbatu Ensesa, where water related problems are causing serious deteriorations. Only urgent actions save the church of Sarzina Mikael as some parts of the church have already crumbled.
- ❖ Researches carried out by professionals are an important step should be taken. Continuous researches that updates results of researches and materials and methods of past restoration practices are essential in the implementation of appropriate conservation projects. Researches on the churches have to involve culture and tourism

bureaus at different level. Involvement of conservators in research projects help to build their professional competency through experience shared in the processes.

- ❖ Culture and tourism bureaus, as bodies take the lion share in management of heritages, have to initiate researches of their own.
- ❖ Periodical and continuous documentations through video films, detailed photographing provides great deal of information regarding changes on the churches and serve as good sources of information for researchers and conservators to decide the steps they have to take in researching and conserving the churches and related heritages. Systematic registration also plays important role in fighting theft and illicit trafficking.
- ❖ Assigning professionals, who have appropriate knowledge and skill for office and field activities is an important step should be taken. Trained personnel on the sites are assurance to proper management of the churches (related to physical interventions). On the other hand planning and execution of sound management activities can be achieved in the presence of efficient administrators in bureaus of different levels. Management activities on individual churches are also integral part of the management process. Workshops, short-term trainings and extended trainings are methods should be employed in building the capacity of heritage administrators at different levels.
- ❖ Continuous capacity building trainings have to be organized for tourist guides and anyone serve as intermediary between the heritages and tourists. These people have to meet the moral and ethical standards. Individual merit of guides is an important aspect as professional qualification. Proper interpretation of history and careful handling of heritages emanates from these elements.

- ❖ Organizations and individuals need to be involved at different scales in consultation, planning and physical intervention. Their involvement may include investment on heritages in supporting efforts of promotion, conservation and investments in tourism. Organizations and individuals are also expected engage themselves in professional researches.
- ❖ Management of the tourism sector should be conducted in a way satisfies the need and interest of tourists and respect meaning of cultural heritages for the host community.
- ❖ The role of the public sector is central in overall management process. At local level they are considered as custodian of Cultural Heritages and such role of local communities are extremely important. Local communities should share the benefits so that social development returns may be obtained.
- ❖ The guarantee of sufficient funds to finance heritage management tasks and operations is another important aspect that needs the involvement of governmental and non-governmental organizations. Responsible government bodies have to support management programs based on the reports and analysis of the results of the activities and operations measured in financial terms.
- ❖ There must be strong relation between bureaus at local and regional level and agencies and authorities at federal level.
- ❖ Creating awareness among the community regarding shared ownership of the heritages is an important aspect should be considered, as conflicts related question of ownership have huge impact on the overall heritage management activities. Non-cooperation among stake holders is an obstacle for development of the tourism sector.

- ❖ The under developed infrastructure sector of the area is one of the obstacles for sustainable cultural tourism on these churches. Improving the existing trend in infrastructure development is an important step should be taken by the government.
  
- ❖ Organized and continuous promotions without doubt increase tourist flow to the area. Promotion activities need to be initiated by governmental and non-governmental organizations and individuals.

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## List of Informants

No	Name	Date of Interview	Place of Interview	Remarks
1	Alemu Tizazu ( <i>Kes Gebez</i> )	2/1/2012	Bilbala Giyorgis	A priest at the church of Bilbala Giyorgis
2	Desalegn ( <i>Kes</i> )	26/12/2011	Neakuto Le'ab	A priest at the Neakuto Le'ab Church
3	Habtamu Tesfaw ( <i>Ato</i> )	24/11/2011	Lalibela	Heritage conservation and tourism development officer at Lalibela Culture and Tourism Office
4	Kelemewerk ( <i>Kese Gebez</i> )	19/12/2011	Abune Yosef	A priest at the church of Abune Yosef
5	Moges Tefera ( <i>Ato</i> )	10/1/2012	Lalibela	Heritage Inventory Officer at Lalibela Culture and Tourism Office
6	Nigusie Legesu ( <i>kes</i> )	17/1/2012	Bilbala Kirkos	A priest at the church of Bilbala Kirkos
7	Tegegn Kenaw ( <i>Ato</i> )	11/1/2012	Lalibela	Tourist service giving institutions controlling officer at Lalibela Culture and Tourism Office

8	Sewmehone ( <i>Ato</i> )	29/11/2011	Lalibela	Guide for Ethiopian Tourists
9	Wendimeneu Bekele ( <i>Kes</i> )	8/1/2012	Sarzina Mikael	A priest at the church of Sarzina Mikael
10	Yalew Eshete ( <i>Kes</i> )	23/12/2011	Imekina Lideta Maryam	A priest at the church of Imekina Lideta Maryam
11	Yibabe Fasil ( <i>Merigeta</i> )	5/1/2012	Arbatu Ensessa	<i>Kine memihir</i> at the church of Arbatu Ensessa

# Appendixes

## Appendix I

### Interview Questions

#### I. Interview details :

- A. Name\_\_\_\_\_
- B. Social position\_\_\_\_\_
- C. Place of interview\_\_\_\_\_
- D. Date of interview\_\_\_\_\_

#### II. Questions

1. When did the church hewed or built?
2. Who constructed the church?
3. Do you know any other rock church in the area (close to the church or in Lasta Woreda)?
4. How often tourists visit the church?
5. What are the major conservation activities conducted by Lalibela Town Culture and Tourism Office?
6. Are tangible heritages of the church documented?

## **DECLARATION**

I, the undersigned, declare that this thesis is my work and all sources of material used for the thesis have been duly acknowledged.

Name: Natnael Ketema

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: July 2012

Addis Ababa University