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## **Conserving the Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela as a World Heritage Site: a case for international support and local participation**

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### **Abstract**

#### **1. Introduction**

The rock-hewn churches of Lalibela in Ethiopia were one of the first twelve sites to be inscribed by UNESCO on the World Heritage List in 1978 (UNESCO, 1978)<sup>1</sup>. It was also one of the first restoration projects to be sponsored by the World Monuments Fund in the 1960s. Since then, conservation of the site has continued to be a focus for international support in the context of evolving heritage disciplines and practices. The World Heritage status of the site has contributed to a sense of shared global responsibility for its conservation and to socio-economic development through the use of heritage as a tourism resource. This development needs to be balanced to prevent irreversible damage and loss of inestimable heritage resources.

Lalibela is a living heritage. The churches, the ecclesiastical objects and the religious practices constitute an important part of the local community and traditional way of life. The conservation challenge is to safeguard both tangible and intangible aspects of the site in the context of development and town expansion. The recent establishment of a management plan process has become a forum for future conservation through participatory means in order to achieve sustainable development. With increasing globalisation of heritage, World Heritage Management has emerged as an interdisciplinary field of study with the potential to create new opportunities for multidisciplinary research and dialogue both globally and locally. This paper discusses these issues in the context of *Heritage and Social Change* as the selected ICOMOS Scientific Symposium theme for 2010.

#### **2. World Heritage Nomination and International Assistance**

ICOMOS, in its first evaluation of World Heritage nominations, included the eleven rock-hewn churches of Lalibela as one of seven cultural sites which both corresponded to the requirements for the criteria for cultural properties and the necessary minimum standards of documentation (ICOMOS, 1978a). In its recommendation, ICOMOS proposed that the site should be inscribed under criteria I, II and III, having identified three distinguishing types of church: built-up cave churches, rock-hewn cave churches and rock-hewn monolithic churches (ICOMOS, 1978b). Under the first criterion, the eleven churches represented as an ensemble "a unique artistic achievement" due to their scale, variety and audacity in form. Under the second criterion, it was recognised that the building of the churches by King Lalibela as a New Jerusalem and a substitute destination of pilgrimage for his people had a "considerable influence" on the development of Ethiopian Christianity. Under criterion three, the church ensemble was identified as a "unique testimony" to Ethiopian civilisation during the Medieval and Post-Medieval periods. Under this last criterion, the remains of the

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<sup>1</sup> The twelve sites included *L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Park* (Canada); *Nahanni National Park* (Canada); *Galápagos Islands* (Ecuador); *City of Quito* (Ecuador); *Simien National Park* (Ethiopia); *Rock Hewn Churches, Lalibela* (Ethiopia); *Aachen Cathedral* (Federal Republic of Germany); *Cracow's Historic Centre* (Poland); *Wieliczka – salt mine* (Poland); *Island of Gorée* (Senegal); *Mesa Verde* (US); and *Yellowstone* (US).

traditional historic houses, built in two storeys and circular form, were recognised as equally important for preservation as the rock-hewn churches.

The principal aims of the World Heritage Convention are to ensure the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value. While this responsibility rests mainly with the States Parties, the Convention recognises that in some cases international assistance and co-operation, particularly financial, artistic and technical, will be necessary (UNESCO, 1972, Article 4). The need for international assistance to protect heritage of universal significance formed a fundamental part of the conceptual development of World Heritage. In 1965, a White House Conference in Washington on International Co-operation called for a 'World Heritage Trust' to stimulate international co-operation to protect "the world's superb natural and scenic areas and historic sites for the present and the future benefit of the entire world citizenry" (Train, 2003, 36). This is often cited as one of the key developments having led to the establishment of the World Heritage Convention in 1972, together with UNESCO-led international efforts such as the rescuing of the Abu Simbel temples in Egypt in 1959 and the Saving Venice campaign in 1966.

The World Monuments Fund (initially named the International Fund for Monuments) was established in 1965 as a private non-profit organisation working to assist in the safeguarding of endangered cultural heritage (WMF, 2005). In the words of its former Chairman Mr. Charles M. Grace, it was formed by a group of individuals who "recognized the need, long expressed by UNESCO, for an organization to assist in the costs of preserving monuments in those countries which lack the financial means of doing so alone". Furthermore, he stated: "the project in Lalibela is a splendid example of this arrangement. It is a joint effort involving close collaboration with the Imperial Ethiopian Government on a fund-matching basis" (IFM, 1967, 6). Thus, the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela became one of the first restoration projects to receive sponsorship from the organisation. The project involved assistance by a team of Italian conservators including documentation, stabilisation efforts and an initiative to remove a bituminous coating to the external surface, preventing the natural breathing of the rock, thereby causing deterioration.

More recently, the World Monuments Fund has partnered with UNESCO and Ethiopian institutions to address conservation of the rock-hewn churches, site management, presentation and training of local personnel in order to achieve sustainable conservation practices. Other international assistance of major significance includes the EU-funded project 'Temporary shelters over five churches in Lalibela', led by UNESCO. It involved the building of temporary shelters to protect the rock-hewn churches from rainfall and erosion, as well as new cultural and visitor centres (UNESCO, 2006) (Figure 1).

### **3. Conserving the Cultural Significance of Lalibela as Living Heritage**

Lalibela is a small mountain town located in the northern part of Ethiopia. It is situated on the side of a mountain in a picturesque landscape characterised by a rugged topography at an altitude of over 2,500 meters. Located in the centre of the town, the eleven rock-hewn churches are surrounded by densely built residential areas. As a living heritage, the cultural significance of Lalibela consists of a range of values to be preserved, including the rock-hewn churches, the sacred ecclesiastical objects and the spiritual practices to the vernacular buildings, the town, the topographic impact on settlements, the cultural landscape and the spirit of the place.

The *Québec Declaration on the Preservation of the Spirit of Place*, adopted by ICOMOS in 2008, recognised the interdependency of the tangible and intangible dimensions of heritage stating that: "the spirit of place is made up of tangible (sites, buildings, landscapes, routes, objects) as well as intangible elements (memories, narratives, written documents, festivals, commemorations, rituals, traditional knowledge, values, textures, colors, odors, etc.), which all significantly contribute to making place and to giving it spirit" (ICOMOS, 2008, para. 1). The Declaration also recognised the challenge of conserving intangible components of heritage in particular and called for training programmes, legal policies and effective communication strategies to safeguard the spirit of a place. This can be particularly challenging in the context of pressing needs for economic development and processes of modernisation.

#### *Historical Significance of the Rock-Hewn Churches*

Historians frequently cite Francisco Alvares, an early sixteenth century traveller, as the first foreign observer to have recorded his descriptions of the churches of Lalibela. His writings illustrate the strong impression of early visitors: "I am weary of writing more about these

buildings, because it seems to me that I shall not be believed if I write more, and because regarding what I have already written they may blame me for untruth, therefore, I swear by God, in Whose power I am, that all that is written is the truth, and there is much more than what I have written, and I have left it that they may not tax me with its being falsehood" (cited in Pankhurst, 2005, 49). Except for the churches themselves, perhaps what strikes today's visitors the most is the sense of a living heritage and uninterrupted use of the churches by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as sacred places of worship and traditional way of life.

The building of the churches is still somewhat shrouded in mystery and there are different perspectives on when they were constructed. According to traditional account the churches were built during the reign of King Lalibela, founder of the town of Lalibela (originally called Roha but later re-named after the King) during the time of the Zagwe dynasty, which ruled over Ethiopia from the eleventh to the mid-thirteenth centuries, following the shift of power southward after the decline of the Aksumite Empire. The *Gedle*, or Acts of Lalibela, states that the king built of the churches in the likeness of what he had seen in Heaven through a vision, with the help of both men and angels (Pankhurst, 2005).

Archaeologically, it has been suggested that internal evidence "shows that they originated from a common but diverse tradition over substantial period of time" (Philipson, 2009, 179). This view was similarly maintained in the original ICOMOS evaluation report which stated that "*toutes ces églises ne sont pas contemporaines du saint roi Lalibela (XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle) dont la Vie légendaire affirme que*" (ICOMOS, 1978b). A recent archaeological chronology suggests that the Lalibela churches developed over five stages stretching from the eighth century to the early thirteenth century, and that "persistent traditions attributing all the churches to King Lalibela's reign should thus be interpreted as indicating the time when the most recent hypogea were added, and when the complex as a whole received its present form and symbolism" (Philipson, 2009, 180). Furthermore, the original function of some of the churches may initially have been non-ecclesiastical, e.g. Merkurios and Gabriel-Rafa'el. This was also maintained in the initial World Heritage evaluation which stated that "*certaines salles souterraines, antérieures, paraissent n'avoir été affectées au culte chrétien qu'après avoir connu une destination profane: ainsi Biet Mercoreos et Biet Gabriel Rafael qui sont peut-être d'anciennes résidences royales*" (ICOMOS, 1978b).

The churches were carved out of red volcanic tuff, varying in hardness and composition, several interconnected through trenches and underground passages. The first group consists of six churches to the northwest of the Jordan River, including Medhane Alem, Maryam, Mika'el, Golgotha, Danagel and Masqal. The second group to the southeast of the river includes four churches: Gabriel-Rafa'el, Merkurios, Emmanuel and Abba Libanos. The third group consists of an isolated single monolithic church with a Greek cross plan: Giorgis (see Figure 2). A number of factors have contributed to deterioration of the churches. Erosion and water infiltration due to heavy rainfalls, in combination with cracks from inherent faults in the stone and stresses from carving, and chemical phenomena such as the presence of salts as efflorescence on the surface and as concretions under the surface, have had negative impact on the rock churches causing disintegration. Biological phenomena such as microbiological attack and human factors have also contributed to the deterioration process. Several attempts have been made to protect and restore the churches in the past, although some of the early interventions are considered to have damaged the structures, such as the above-mentioned bituminous coating to the external surfaces. Figure 3 shows Church of Maryam from the southwest with porches significantly rebuilt in 1919 and further repair works made in 1966-7. Figure 4 depicts Gabriel-Rafa'el where conservation works are necessary to address water infiltration and structural instability caused by cracks.

#### *Ecclesiastical objects*

A wealth of ecclesiastical objects forms an intrinsic part of the churches and the religious practices, ranging from processional crosses, bells, chandeliers of gold and silver, priestly vestment and robes, to church paintings, icons, scrolls and manuscripts. Many date to the period of the churches themselves, such as King Lalibela's hand cross and prayer stick. In 1997, the richly decorated golden healing handcross of Lalibela approximately 800 years old was stolen from the Medhane Alem Church, despite security measures. It was smuggled to an antique dealer who sold it to a Belgian collector for USD 25,000, but eventually returned to Ethiopia in 2001 (European Commission, 2003). Various inventories have been undertaken, but theft and illicit trade in cultural objects remain a critical problem.

#### *Religious Rites and Pilgrimage*

The rock-hewn churches are places of worship and amongst the most significant places of pilgrimage for believers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The Ethiopian Christmas (*Genna*) and the Epiphany (*Timkat*) constitute the most important festivals of the place and these attract large numbers of people each year. These intangible dimensions of the heritage contribute to the significance of the churches as a sacred site. However, the Church has suggested that the spiritual value associated with the site is being threatened due to a shift towards a more materialistic and foreign influenced type of culture (Assefa Wondimu, 2007). This may have an adverse impact on the traditional values of the site in the future, particularly with growing emphasis on tourism, economic development and processes of modernisation.

#### *Vernacular Heritage and the Town*

A distinctive feature of Lalibela is the existence of traditional historic houses (*tukuls*) in the vicinity of the churches and in the neighbouring residential areas. These are usually round two-storey structures with a solid outside staircase leading to the upper floor, built of irregular rubble bedded in clay mortar with conical and traditionally thatched roofs. Despite their cultural significance many of them are poorly protected and preserved. Nevertheless, as recognised in the ICOMOS evaluation, although unspecified in number and extent, they form an integral part of the world heritage site: “à côté des onze églises énumérées dans la proposition, des vestiges étendus d’habitat traditionnel – des maisons circulaires à deux niveaux avec escalier intérieur et couverture de chaume – qu’il est indispensable de protéger et de conserver au même titre que les éléments rupestres d’architecture religieuse” (ICOMOS, 1978b). The question is how best to protect, preserve and re-use these houses without compromising their integrity and unexcavated surroundings and at the same time allowing for adaptation (Figure 5).

#### *Cultural Landscape*

Like in many other places there is a shifting focus towards understanding Lalibela as a cultural landscape (Figure 6). A number of questions remain unexplored in terms of the historical significance of the surrounding landscape of the churches and their construction. There is an urgent need to protect the character of the landscape setting and to provide a strategy for its use with continuous town expansion and risk of encroachment on the world heritage site, particularly in the form of new hotel developments.

These issues are under consideration in the work towards a site management plan. The challenge for conservation is to find multiple solutions to conservation of the built structures, their settings and the intangible dimensions which contribute to Lalibela as a living heritage in the context of economic development and tourism expansion.

#### **4. Heritage as a Tool for Development**

Cultural heritage and world heritage sites in particular are increasingly promoted as a focus for international development assistance. The World Bank and UN agencies have included in their agendas the idea of heritage as a cultural resource for achieving socio-economic development. National trust funds have been established by governments within donor and lending agencies incorporating culture as a tool for development. For example, the UNDP/Spain Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund was established in 2007 for transfer of €528 million euro towards key Millennium Development Goals (MDG) over a period of four years. The Fund seeks to address key development challenges central to the achievement of the MDGs, stipulated in the *Millennium Declaration* as a means to reduce world poverty (UN, 2000), and related development goals including the integration of culture and development (Negussie and Assefa-Wondimu, forthcoming). The Declaration “wasn’t a promise of rich nations to poor ones; it was a pact, a partnership, in which each side would meet obligations to its own citizens and to one another” (Bono, 2010).

National governments have also sponsored cultural heritage as part of bi-lateral development projects for poverty alleviation and re-construction in post-conflict societies. For example, the Swedish International Development Agency has worked in partnership with heritage organisations in order to integrate preservation with development assistance, e.g. renovations of the Stone Town in Zanzibar in Tanzania and the Old Royal Palace of Luang Prabang in Laos. It sponsored Cultural Heritage without Borders, a Swedish relief organisation founded in 1995, working in the spirit of the Hague Convention by preserving cultural heritage endangered by war, natural disasters, neglect, poverty or political and social conflict.

UNESCO has become an important actor in capacity-building efforts through its Programme for Culture and Development and promotion of world heritage sites. This is in addition to the World Heritage Fund, which provides international assistance towards world heritage sites on request by any of the States Parties to the World Heritage Convention (e.g. for technical co-operation, training and emergency assistance). ICCROM has also undertaken capacity-building partnership projects such as Africa 2009, a training strategy especially for cultural heritage expertise in African countries.

This growing emphasis on culture in strategies for international development is based on the idea that investment in infrastructure and human capital are keys to sustainable development and long-term reduction of poverty combined with the view that cultural heritage resources can be commercialised and sold as products for consumption as part of the tourism industry. While the link between culture, tourism and development is crucial in economic strategies for local community development, it is necessary to recognise the potential conflict between uses of heritage as cultural and economic resources. Commercialisation of heritage results in a commodification process in which heritage products and experiences become modified into products for the tourism industry (Graham *et al.*, 2000). This threatens the cultural value of heritage as an authentic resource of knowledge, history and culture. A key issue to consider is how to balance tourism with sustainable heritage conservation. This is imperative in countries with urgent need for economic development as they are particularly vulnerable to the adverse impact of tourism on heritage sites. The establishment of a management plan is a compulsory requirement for world heritage sites under the World Heritage Convention. The Operational Guidelines stipulate that 'each nominated property should have an appropriate management plan or other documented management system which should specify how the outstanding universal value of a property should be preserved, preferably through participatory means' (UNESCO, 2008, para. 108). The management plan constitutes an opportunity for the negotiation of the above-mentioned conflict.

Ethiopia is in economic terms one of the poorest countries in the world. However, it has a wealth of cultural and natural resources, including archaeological sites, ancient churches and monasteries, medieval castles, historic towns and traditional festivals. It currently has eight world heritage sites and three proposed sites on the Tentative List. Although the majority of these were inscribed in the first implementation phase of the World Heritage Convention, until recently they have lacked management plans. However, these are now being established and have become a focus for capacity-building efforts. A recent study examined tourism management at the Lalibela World Heritage Site in terms of site conservation, local community benefit and tourist satisfaction, based on the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development. It found that the local community is benefiting from tourism, mainly through infrastructural developments and jobs creation, although there is a need to diversify the economy and the benefits further. It also identified actual and potential threats to the monuments, objects and intangible aspects of heritage, including uncontrolled development and environmental degradation (Assefa-Wondimu, 2007). It has been suggested elsewhere that "it is from the inexorable growth of tourism and the lack – so far – of effective visitor management that Lalibela's religious eminence is most seriously threatened" (Philipson, 2009, 181).

## **5. Towards a Management Plan for Lalibela**

The urgent need to establish a management plan for the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela has led to a series of partnership projects and workshops led by the Ethiopian Authority for Research on Conservation of Cultural Heritages (ARCCH), the state body in charge of national and world heritage sites, supported by international agencies and bi-lateral collaborations. In 2009, the author undertook a small-scale partnership project entitled 'Establishing a Management Plan Process for the World Heritage Site of Lalibela' through the World Heritage Management Programme at University College Dublin in collaboration with colleagues in the ARCCH based on previous research exchange, jointly funded by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Ethiopia and the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government in Ireland. It involved the implementation of an on-site workshop for the establishment of a participatory multi-stakeholder management plan process covering issues relating to site protection, tourism and community development. It brought together over fifty participants who discussed topics as introduced by speakers, including representatives from federal, regional and local authorities, professionals working in the culture and tourism sectors, and representatives from the Church, the community, the guides association, the hotels, the Lalibela youth association, and the women's association. The broad representation provided a wide scope of input towards the discussions and the field visits. This can be seen as a complement to capacity-building projects by international

organisations such as UNESCO, building bridges for co-operation and exchange between heritage and research institutions locally.

The management plan needs to identify objectives and a long-term vision for the site based on stakeholder participation and interdisciplinary collaboration. One of the current five strategic objectives of the World Heritage Convention is to "enhance the role of Communities in the implementation of the World Heritage Convention" (UNESCO, 2008, para. 26). Furthermore, it needs to strike a balance between conservation, access, local community interests and sustainable economic use, while ensuring preservation of the outstanding universal value as the primary objective. Different framework plans are required to ensure sustainable development in Lalibela. A sustainable heritage framework will cover conservation actions relating to the rock-hewn churches, the historic traditional houses, movable objects, policies to safeguard intangible heritage and the landscape setting. A sustainable tourism and visitor framework is required to control visitor flows, traffic and congestion, finding new methods of financing heritage and ensuring high quality experiences. An environmental framework plan is necessary to come to terms with environmental degradation, waste management, water policy and carbon emissions. Finally, a local community framework plan must ensure local participation in decisions concerning the world heritage site and in the benefits of tourism. The development of traditional handicrafts activities has proved a particularly important resource for cultural and economic development, as demonstrated by the forming of the St. Lalibela Artisan Association as a crafts centre in a renovated town house supported by UNESCO (Dubois, 2008) (Figure 7).

## 6. Conclusion

This paper highlighted the significance of World Heritage listing in the context of traditional society, evolving communities and living heritage at the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela. It also explored shifts towards the use of heritage as a tool for social and economic development, noting that tourism-based development may both contribute to and comprise heritage sites. It stressed the need for an integrated site management plan with a clear vision based on high standards for future protection of the site, including tangible and intangible dimensions, with reconciliation of tourism interests and development pressures in a way that ensures long-term conservation, benefits for the local community and consideration for religious practices and use of the rock-hewn churches as a sacred site. This challenge requires continued commitment from local and national stakeholders, as well as support from the international community.

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## 8. Images



Figure 1: *Temporary shelters to protect the churches from rainfalls* (Author, 2009)



Figure 2: *Church of Saint Giorgis (Author, 2010).*



Figure 3: *Church of Maryam from the southwest (Author, 2010).*



Figure 4: *Church of Gabriel-Rafa'el (Author, 2009).*



Figure 5: *Vernacular historic houses on the Church compound (Author, 2009).*



Figure 6: *View of the sheltered churches and landscape from hill (Author, 2009).*



Figure 7: *Crafts studio at the St. Lalibela Artisan Association (Author, 2009).*