

## An Investigating the SWOT Analysis of Cultural Tourism Heritage for Sustainable Tourism Development: The Case of LALIBELA Rock Hewn Churches, World Heritage Site, Ethiopia

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### Abstract

Yearly, many nations try to inscribe their heritages under the list of world heritage site for the ensuring the sustainable tourism development. However there is a big problem of examining the strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats on the heritages for sustainable tourism development. The main objectives of his study are to inculcate the strength, weakness, opportunities and threats of cultural tourism heritage for sustainable tourism development in the case of world heritage site, Lalibela. To undertake this study, descriptive research was employed. The target populations were, the tour guides, the local communities, the hotel and tourism experts, religious fathers and tourists. Twenty one respondents were chosen through purposive sampling. The data instruments used were filed observation, in-depth- interview through telephoning and face to face and document review. The findings proved that strengths like the Lalibela cross, unique festivals, quality accommodation establishments, indigenous culture, 11 rock hewn churches, spectacular topography. Weaknesses are coordination problem, lack of professionals, sufficient budget problem, and lack of concern form UNESCO. Opportunities are government attention, to be pride, foreign exchange, developing awareness. Threats are carrying capacity problem, globalization, dependency on tourism, political instability. Thus, the stakeholders at the Lalibela destinations should try to identify minimize and solve the weakness threats and use the strengths and opportunities to ensure the sustainable tourism development at the destination.

**Keywords:** Lalibela; Sustainable tourism; Strengths; Weakness; Opportunities; Threats

### Introduction

Tourism is a collection of activities, services, and industries which convey a travel practice comprising transportation, accommodation, eating and drinking establishments, retail shops, entertainment businesses and other hospitality services provided for individuals or groups moving away from home and it is also a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes [1,2].

Cultural heritage tourism complies travel concerned with experiencing the visual and performing arts, heritage buildings, landscapes, and special lifestyles, values, traditions and events has become a major force in the tourism industry [3]. Cultural tourism development encourages the growing interest in authentic cultural experiences [4,5]. The conservation of cultural heritage is a good opportunity to build the environment and communities in the developing countries [6]. One of the strongest sustainability issues for heritage conservation is that material conservation is an inherently waste-avoidance activity. This issue is entirely consistent with a common definition of sustainability as the reduction of environmental impact by not consuming nonrenewable resources. Our awareness of the fragility of old materials mirrors society's concerns with the fragility of the air, land, and water and with fossil fuels as a finite resource [7].

The main aim of the conservation of cultural heritage is to balance the activities of the construction and achieving social, economic and cultural benefits for present and future generations [8,9]. The cultural heritage tourism is usually includes leisure trip with the primary purpose of visiting historic, cultural, natural, recreational and scenic attraction to learn more about the past in an enjoyable way [3]. Each urban heritage area should be viewed as a destination with a large number of interdependent activities and concerns. This provides the

community, as well as the many stakeholders involved in planning and management, with a more interdisciplinary and comprehensive form of tourism development [2].

Collaborations or partnerships are important for the diffusion of sustainable tourism development [5,10]. The lack of effective communication and understanding among stakeholders remains problematic for the achievement of sustainable tourism development [11]. Sustainable tourism development can occur only when the practice of compromising or trade-off ceases and, instead, the harmonization between both heritage tourism and conservation flourishes [12,13] argues that sustainable tourism needs to be understood from a steady-state economic perspective that explicitly recognizes the extent to which economic development, including tourism, is dependent on the stock of natural capital. All World Heritage Sites now require management plans and full-time professional site managers (as stipulated by international agreements defined by UNESCO and its World Heritage agencies). The principles of such plans must be understood, and they must be incorporated in the respective national and local legislation [5].

Managing cultural heritage tourism requires a number of issues to be dealt with. For those involved in heritage preservation the challenge

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is to identify and work effectively with the tourism industry. For those in the tourism sector there is a need to recognize the needs of host communities as well as the ethics and concerns that are part of preserving cultural heritage [2,4].

The real threat of cultural tourism heritage lies in the erosion of the power of communities to control the boundaries of tourism [14]. Because if the local communities retain control, their culture will be less influenced by western culture and impacts on cultural resources will be reduced. On the other hand, if control is entirely out of the hands of local communities, outsiders will increasingly dictate tourism and its consequences (IBID). Failures in management taken as a whole form the largest threat in all Regions and all sites [15]. 95% of sites of world heritage in Africa are affected by management issues. 88% in Asia/ Pacific, 77% in Latin America, 77% in Arab States and 41% in Europe [14,15].

Sustainable tourism development presents many challenges. Meeting these challenges is a major task of policy makers as well as communities if they are to achieve comprehensive and sustainable heritage tourism development. There are a number of obstacles to achieving sustainable heritage tourism destinations [16-18]. Some major obstacles include the lack of financial resources, poor forms of governance, inappropriate project management processes, and ineffective enforcement of regulations, corruption and lack of support for heritage conservation [2,4].

## Research Methods and Materials

Descriptive research design was employed to investigate the current statues of the strength, weakness, opportunities and threats of the world heritages site, Lalibela rock hewn churches. Qualitative approach was followed to undertake the study. The target populations were tourism experts, domestic and foreign tourists, tour guiding association, religious fathers, and local communities. Respondents were selected through non probability sampling techniques. Purposively sampling technique and snow ball sampling were conducted based on the respondents' nearness for the issue, relevant work experience, and their exposure to the area, their interest to involve in the study. Having these sampling techniques, twenty one respondents were selected. Semi structured interview, observation and document analysis were the data instruments undertaken to answer the research questions. Researcher was tried to devote enough time to conducts in-depth interview with each respondents regarding each cases. Finally the researcher processed the data collected through content analysis.

## Results and Discussions

### Strengths of the Lalibela rock hewn churches for sustainable tourism development

**Spectacular topography:** Lalibela is endowed with spectacular topography. The rugged mountains make the Lalibela destination more attractive. The result of observation and interviews from the respondents revealed that most foreign and domestic tourists appreciate and entertain with the nature gifted topography. The mountainous areas of the Lalibela destination are good for developing sustainable tourism development at the heritage site and it can also be alternative tourism products in addition to the rock hewn churches.

One of the foreign tourist interviewed at Lalibela said the following:

What the very attractive topography it is!!! The topography is just like the book. Just as you finished one mountain, you will get another mountain. The size, the view, the history, the names of each mounts

sounds attractive. Looking the town at the peak of each mountain is very wonderful.

**Eleven magnificent rock hewn churches:** What makes the destination the site where the impossible has become possible and the incredible has become credible are its magnificent rock hewn churches. All most all the domestic and foreign tourists are feeling delighted on what they have been explored regarding the rock hewn churches. These churches are the reason for the livelihood of the communities. The majority poeplas of the lalibela destination are working in the tourism and its related jobs. Tourism has a great values on the society economical, socio-cultural, environemntal aspects. The intergrations of these dimenstions ensures the sustainable tourism developemnt at the destination.

One of the forign tourist from spian stated the follwing:

Thinking as there was the sklledenginner 900 years back in Ethiopia is looks dream but it is real in lalibela. His wisdom and work can be a lesson for the wolrd enginners. I have tried to explore many tourist destinations in the world but lalibela is totally different.

There rock hewn churches of lalibela are belived to be more than one hundred in Ethiopia, however evelen rock hewn churches are found in a single stone which is named now Lalibela town. The rock hewn churches of Lalibela are grouoed in to three. First group, second group and third group. Each churches has unique natures and different symboles with Biblical interpretation and justification (Figure 1). The names of each churches are listed as follows:

Bete medihanialem	Bete Giyorgis
Bete Maryam	Bete Denagil
Bete Golegotha	Bete Mika'el
Bete Amanuel	Bete Meskel
Bete Merkerios	Bête Aba Libanos
Bete Gebreal-Rufael	

### Indigenous culture and traditions of the local communities:

The Lalibela tourist destination is not limited on the magnificent rock hewn churches and its spectacular topography; it is also endowed with indigenous culture and traditions of the local communities. Most of the informants agreed that, in the Lalibela tourist destination site, each practices, cultures, traditions and norms are unique and indigenous. For instance, the music and dancing style, the hospitality practices of the communities during the annual festivals of the religious and cultural events, the ways of life of the communities, the destinations history, and the names of the each specific place of the town is attached to the Biblical symbol and interpretation. These all are the sign of the existence of the practices of sustainable tourism development. Indigenous communities often have wide practices for the sustainable management of their destination. So indigenous practices have proven to be successful, they can produce similar results as Western approaches, they can be inexpensive, and, through religious or spiritual prescriptions, can sometimes be enforced.

**Clean and quality accommodation establishments:** To be the tourist destination, in addition to attraction sites there should also be accommodation and accessibility. As Lalibela is the top most tourists' attractions particularly in Ethiopia and globally in the world, there are many hotels which are quite clean, welcoming, neat, groomed, uniformed and standard. Most accommodation establishments are strategically located near main attractions like the monolithic churches



Source: LWCTO, 2019

**Figure 1:** The left the group one rock hewn churches of Lalibela and the right the locations of 11 rock hewn churches of Lalibela.

in Lalibela. They are also complemented by the beautiful views of Lalibela Mountains. As observation proved that most hotels in Lalibela are in close proximity to several restaurants, artisan shops, and bars. As per the filled observations and document analysis, here are around 30 famous hotels in Lalibela tourist destination site.

**Unique festivals of the destination (Bezakulu festival, Epiphany festival and Ashendye festival):** Ledet (Christmas) falls on December 29 Ethiopian calendars (January 7 Gregorian calendar). It is celebrated after 43 days fasting known as Tsome Gahad (Advent), with a spectacular procession, which begins at 6 AM and lasts until 9 AM. After the mass service, people go home to break the fast with the meat of chicken or lamb or beef accompanied with injera and the traditional drinks such as tella or tej. Bezakulu festival is the most famous religious festivals which is celebrated during the Christmass holyday.

Epiphany festival is another most attractive religious event in Lalibela. Like that of Christmas, the destination is fully occupied through foreign tourists to explore the practice of the celebrations which is highly facilitated and conducted through the religious fathers and peoples like clergies, deacons, preachers, traditional musicians, local and traditional games and the like.

Ashendye festival is another most well-known and outshines local and traditional festivals of Lalibela and its surroundings. The term "Ashendye" is named after a thin and long leaf, called Ashendye which the girls wear/tie it over their dress on their waist down in a fashionable pattern. So to celebrate Ashendye festival, one of the most basic and important tool is green grass. Green grass is found if there is only naturally green environment [4]. The communities are always looking the summer season to celebrate the festival. Especially it is highly celebrated through the females as the major aim of Ashendye is based the females as the sign of giving them freedom for the females and they are the active participant of the event. The festival has also its wide historical background. So having great historical background on

one of the historical routes of the country makes the festival with a lot of historical values (Figure 2).

### The lalibela cross

It is still another most likely and interesting treasures of the destinations. Unless lacking an opportunity, no tourist is going back to his original environment without watching the Lalibela cross. In Amharic language the Lalibela cross is named "Afro Ayigebe" and it means that the Lalibela cross can heal and save many religious patients from their disease. Each parts of the cross has its own meaning and Biblical symbolic. The Lalibela cross is found at bet medihanialem rock hewn church. St. Lalibela constructed specific place for the cross. As interview with religious fathers assured the Lalibela cross is public while there is annual and special religious holydays. At the time when it is public, most tourists are become very eager to be blessed and watch the cross [19-22].

One of the tourists stated the following

I got the chance to see the Lalibela cross. I am very lucky. Like the rock hewn churches, it is incredible to know the wisdom of making the cross. It is the work and the gift of the almighty God to St. Lalibela. I have to word to express the miracles and the uniqueness of the cross and it better to watch and give thanks for God (Figure 3).

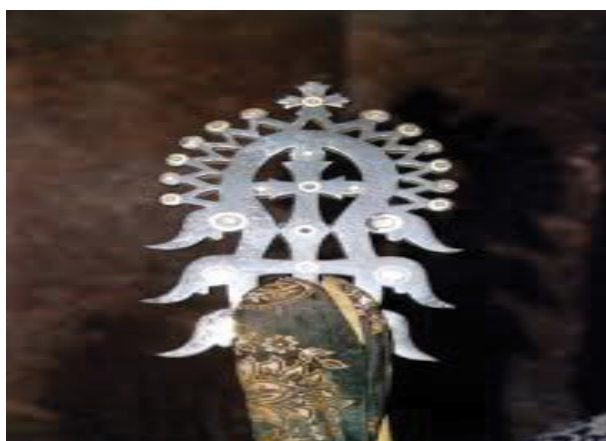
### Weakness of the Lalibela rock hewn churches for sustainable tourism development

**Lack of concern form UNESCO for maintenance and restoration of the rock hewn churches of Lalibela:** Currently, the Lalibela churches are found on risk currently. Even though it is found under the list of world heritage site, a lot remains to be done to ensure sustainable tourism development at the destination. All most all the rock hewn churches need fast and careful restoration and maintenance. Most of the time as most interviewee ensured that while restoring the heritages,





**Figure 2:** The left Bezakulu, the middle Epiphany and in the right, Ashendye festival. Source: Author's own.



Source: Authors own, 2018

**Figure 3:** The Lalibela cross.

there is a great problem which is raised from lack of skilled man power. It is clearly known that the country is being promoted through the original works of Lalibela. There are many leaders of developed nations have been visiting the Lalibela rock hewn churches. It is known that it is the only churches calved from the ground in the world however there is a great problem on giving attention through the responsible bodies. The World Heritage Centre has issued guidelines for preparing and maintaining management plans for heritage sites. The main emphasis here is on management rather than physical design. First of all, this aim sat establishing clear institutional arrangements for “site management” – which in fact seems to be one of the most difficult things to do [5]. It should be obvious that the goal of heritage safeguarding needs to be incorporated in the procedures for building and planning permits in or near the “heritage sites” as such. This would require carrying out specific impact assessment studies similar to those that have been developed and used for the protection of the environment (Ibid). As per respondents agreed that cultural impact assessment methods and techniques are already available but in practice, they have not been used very much.

#### **Lack of sufficient budget for conservation of the rock hewn**

**churches of Lalibela:** One of the advantages of inscribing the heritages under the world heritage list is just to get fund for the purpose of preserving and conserving the heritages. However there is a great problem on providing sufficient amount of budget for saving the churches from damaging. UNESCO is not providing sufficient amount of budget for saving these world heritages site. As most of the respondents agreed that the local communities, responsible stakeholders and government always shouting to the world for getting different stakeholders who can sponsor for purpose of conserving the churches.

One of the tourist guides in Lalibela stated the following:

Currently, as everybody can look, the churches are become damaged from time to time since they have been delivering service since 900 years ago. But now these churches need careful conservation mechanisms to sustain for a long period of time. It is known than the cost of conserving ancient heritages is maybe high. However all the peoples of the world should give concern for this unique heritage.

Most agreed that heritage management normally requires specific institutional and funding arrangements however both require special efforts that are neither easy to make institutionally nor easy to sustain financially. In poor countries, another problematic dimension of living historical environments is the discrepancy between the specific demands of heritage sites and the poverty in institutional and financing terms.

**Lack of professionals on conservation and preservation on ancient buildings, rock hewn churches and caves:** In Ethiopia in general there is a great problem of skilled professional in tourism and hospitality industry. The tourism sector is found on infant stage in the country. Though the country is endowed with unlimited tourism attraction sites, there is a great problem on lacking skilled profession on tourism, heritage archeology and other related fields.

**Weak coordination and overall strategy for protecting and managing the rock hewn churches:** There are many sectors which are private, government, associations and others. While these sectors are meeting, they can win every problems of the destination. As per most informants agreed that in Lalibela there is a great problem on coordination to save the holy land of Lalibela. Achieving integration, however, is regarded as a challenging task as it requires mollifying many stakeholders in the sector [12,16]. It is not difficult to imagine

that heritage management implies global concerns regarding the loss of cultural resources, and global initiatives such as the World Heritage List and its continuous management, This includes very heavy responsibilities both in terms of creating and providing the professional capability that is needed, and in terms of financial obligations, at the national, regional, local, including the personal level.

#### **Opportunities of the Lalibela rock hewn churches for sustainable tourism development:**

**Developing awareness and the growth of tourists from time to time:** Observation and document review revealed that the flow of tourist is dramatically increasing yearly. Their originality and outstanding values of the churches makes the foreign and domestic tourists increase from time to time. The underlying motivation and rationale for conservation is that the speed of change in recent decades has been much faster than in the past; thus there are serious threats, losses to the finite heritage resources (natural and cultural); and that broad sectors of society are worried by vanishing cultural identity which is being eroded and substituted by the leveling effects of economic and cultural globalization.

**An increment of the foreign exchange:** It is true that foreign tourists have great opportunities to increase foreign exchange in the country. Lalibela has the greatest chance to be visited through foreign tourists who are coming with foreign currency. As depicted from interview and observation especially starting October up to May, there is amazing flow of foreign tourist to the destination and it is actually called peak season. Tourism is the biggest foreign exchange earner for most nations of the world. Tourism affects the economy of the host nation and is very crucial for the contribution of growing Gross Domestic product. The state is a major beneficial from tourism in terms of taxes. Tourism provides large scale employment [3]. Tourism also frequently provides an economic incentive to safeguard local cultures and the natural environment. In this way, economic sustainability becomes an essential ingredient of fostering sustainable tourism [17].

#### **To be pride**

Every Lalibela communities in particular and the whole peoples of the country are highly proud of with the rock hewn churches. Their livelihood is highly depending on these heritages. It is said with the local peoples that St. Lalibela and his work is the soul of the current peoples of Lalibela even for the surroundings. Actually not only the Lalibela and surroundings, the overall peoples of Ethiopia is proud with the work of St. Lalibela. As most respondents agreed that Lalibela was not only Saint but he was also the Emperor of Ethiopia.

#### **Many academic institutions are producing a lot of tourism and related professionals**

It is appreciable that most academic institutions are providing tourism and related professionals. Many universities and colleges are now becoming the centers of tourism occupation program. This indicates there can be many researchers who can minimize and solve the challenges of the sector in the country. Today in Ethiopia; there is a widespread of academic institutions in different directions at every place. For instance the Ethiopian universities grow from eight to forty-one university in now times. From here, many universities are opening tourism management, heritage management, hotel and tourism management, archeology and other related field of studies [4].

#### **Government gives attention for the tourism industry**

It is clearly seen that the Ethiopia government is now giving a great

attention for the tourism sector from time to time. Before long time ago, tourism concept was not the concern of different stakeholders of the nation.

#### **Threats of the Lalibela rock hewn churches for sustainable tourism development**

**Political instability:** Tourism is a very fragile and sensitive industry. It needs peace more than any other industries. There is no peace at the tourist destination sites means, no tourist can travel from different place to the sites. Most agreed that in the time of political unrest in the country, the number of tourist is becoming decrease. While there is political unrest in the country, developed nation government will ban the travel to Ethiopia. Most respondents agreed that for the development of tourism activities at the tourist destination sites, the local community, government and stakeholders have a great responsibility to ensure peace in the whole parts of the country.

The researcher asked one foreign tourists in Lalibela and illustrated the following:

I came here since there is peace in Ethiopia, if no peace, others will not come and see. Heritages can loss their values if there is war and political instability. Look Syria, Yemen and others! And imagine the result of political instability in the nation not only for tourism even for the nations of the country.

**Dependency on tourism activities:** Most of the time the tourist areas are affected though dependability. It is known that tourists are the butter and breads of the host communities. The major problem is the tourism activities are highly exposed to seasonality natures. In the area where the heritages are inscribed under the world heritage sites, most peoples of the destination are highly depend on the tourism activities. As most of the respondents are revealed that, the peoples of the Lalibela communities are living based on the tourism jobs like working at the churches, local and foreign tour guides, travel and tours operators, car rental, hotels, café and restaurants, traditional music houses, pensions, trekking activities towards Abune Josef mountain, hiring mule, serving the guests through providing local food and beverages and others. As per Temesgen's finding, illegal guides and hassling of tourists is expanding in Lalibela and this prevents tourists from relaxing at the same time exacerbating the 'poor image' of the country. One possible way to reduce this could be through mobilizing these peoples (mainly the younger one) and employ them in various development projects [16].

#### **Globalization and acculturation**

Most of the youths on Lalibela are following the western tourist's culture and ways of life. Their wearing style, their feeding style and their language is now becoming a critical issue.

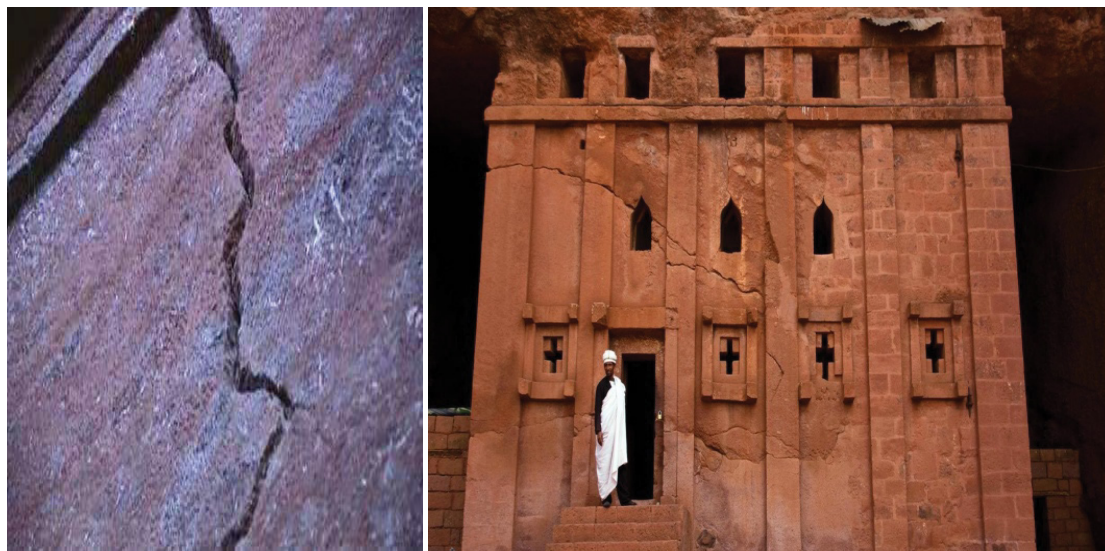
One of experts of tourism industry state the following

Globalization is now seen as the virus for the demolishing the indigenous culture of the local communities of the destination. Here there are lots of foreign tourists are staying about two and three days at Lalibela town to explore different cultural and natural heritages of the tourist site. However during their long stay at the area visited, foreign tourists are showing their new culture for the destination youths. In general in the poor nations, following the cultures of the developed nations is seen as the modern living style.

#### **Carrying capacity problem**

During the annual festival of Lalibela, there is a great risk managing the tourists coming from different corners of the world. Actually most





Source: Authors own, 2018

**Figure 4:** Some of the damaged section of the rock hewn churches of Lalibela.

of the famous and well visited tourist attractions are damaged during their peak time. It is known that the churches are dates back to 900 years ago. Once they are damaging, it is too difficult to get its original values even through restoration.

As observed during the Christmas, Epiphany and other annual festivals of the Lalibela town, the tourists are becoming out of the carrying capacity of the destination and the churches. For instance, during the Christmas, domestic tourists are always become over the capacity of the churches. No one needs to miss form exploring each of the churches of the Lalibela. But most tourists are unable to visit each of the churches with their wonderful interpretations and presentation which is held through the tour guides. Considering the growing stock of World Heritage Sites, it will be necessary to distinguish types of sites – ranging from single buildings and monuments to large areas. It will be useful to define such “sites” by multiple criteria of complexity to find the best-fit types of management [4]. The integration of conservation, design, and operation is a radical approach to future-proofing historic buildings; it can succeed only if we accept a “long life loose fit” strategy to managing historic buildings [7] (Figure 4).

## Conclusion and Recommendation

The study revealed that through it is good opportunity to have heritages which is registered under world heritages site, investigating and assessing the strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats of the rock hewn churches of Lalibela through time is appreciable for ensuring sustainable tourism development at the destination. Strengths are like the Lalibela cross, unique festivals, clean and quality accommodation establishments, indigenous culture and traditions, 11 magnificent rock hewn churches, spectacular topography. Weaknesses are coordination problem, lack of professionals, sufficient budget problem, and lack of concern form UNESCO. Opportunities are government attention, many academic institution, to be pride, foreign exchange, developing awareness. Threats are carrying capacity problem, globalization and acculturation, dependency on tourism, political instability. The strengths and weakness are emanated from the internal environments whereas the opportunities and threats are emanated from the external

environments. Where there is much strength, it will be good for having many opportunities for the destinations. However the destinations have lots of weakness means there will also be many threats. Therefore, stakeholders should do more on sustaining the strengths and retaining the opportunities and identifying the weaknesses through time to minimize the threats which will be occurred.

Finally the researcher tried to put the following recommendations to the responsible body

- The local communities should stand for the sustainable tourism development of the destination.
- The government should provide alternative tourism products and job opportunities for the local communities to solve the dependency of the community on tourism.
- The stakeholders of tourism sector should work cooperatively to ensure sustainable tourism practices.
- The religious fathers and leaders the tourism sectors should work for conservation and preservations of the rock hewn churches of the Lalibela.
- Researchers, scholars, academicians should do more with their profession on the Lalibela destination to assure the sustainable tourism development.

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