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Religious Tourism at Tana Chirkos & St. Kirstos Semra: Contemporary Issues and Prospects for Sustainable Tourism

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Religious tourism is not a new phenomenon or new practice. It has recently received considerable attention in both academia and the public at large. However, even though Ethiopia is endowed with a variety of religious tourism activities, its contemporary issues, and future prospects haven't been utilised, outlined and managed. In the Amhara region, in the South Gondar zone, Tana Chirkos and Kirstos Semra are among the outstanding sites where lots of religious travellers are going and religious tourism activities are held. Thus, this study stands with the general objective of investigating the issues and future prospects of religious tourism development at Tana Chirkos and Kirstos Semra. To study this, a descriptive design is employed. Respondents were selected using the non-probability sampling method through convenience and purposive sampling methods and content analysis was undertaken. The findings prove that acculturation and modernisation, looting and illicit trafficking problems, dependability, poor management ability, and commercialisation are current issues whereas increasing the level of awareness, widespread institutions, government policies, untouched treasures at the sites, and technology advancement are future prospects. Generally, to enhance religious tourism sustainably, all the tourism stakeholders should work together.

Key Words: tourism, issues, prospects, religious, religious tourism, monastery

Background of the Study

According to UNWTO (2016), International tourist arrivals have increased from 25 million globally in 1950 to 278 million in 1980, 674 million in 2000, and 1186 million in 2015. Likewise, international tourism receipts earned by destinations worldwide have surged from US\$ 2 billion in 1950 to US\$ 104 billion in 1980, US\$ 495 billion in 2000, and US\$ 1260 billion in 2015. As a worldwide export category, tourism ranks third after fuels and chemicals and ahead of food and automotive products. In many developing countries, tourism ranks as the primary export sector.

Tourism, travel and pilgrimage are linked by their potential power to transform human lives (Plate, 2009). Tourism is going to be emphasised in all countries in the World in accordance to its potentials. Nowadays it is extensively influencing all of society (Ibid). In the meantime, cultural tourism especially its religious kind has become an important phenomenon and plays a key role in developing tourism in the countries holding religious sites (Yalghouzaghaj & Shorbolagh, 2013; Nurhssen, 2016). Religious tourism

can be defined as:

a special tourist activity oriented by religious culture, with the help of specific eco-cultural environment, and it refers to such special tourist activities as worship, research, sightseeing and culture carried out by religious followers and lay tourists (Raj et al., 2013).

It can also be defined as a travel with the core motive of experiencing religious forms, or the products they induce, like art, culture, traditions and architecture (SIGA Team, 2012).

According to Emeka (2015), religious tourism is one of the earliest forms of tourism that was practiced by people traveling to holy sites. This form of tourism could be traced way back to the dawn of humanity (TN Global Travel Industry News, 2014 as quoted in Gurung, 2016). Travel for religious reasons dates back to the Roman, Greek, Egyptian, and Indus Valley civilisations, and is perhaps the oldest and most prevalent type of travel in human history (Jackowski & Smith, 1992, in Rodriques, 2012) While people travelled for religious reasons in ancient Greece or pre-Christian times, religious tourism became popular in the Middle Ages; when people started

looking for salvation, they visited holy places. Later as they had more free time and during the period of the grand tours they started traveling more and more, also for leisure (Pintér, 2014). Today, hundreds of millions of people travel throughout the world in search of sacredness, spiritual guidance, reaching places considered holy and worshipped (Tala, 2014).

Ethiopia is endowed with a variety of cultural treasures which are most of all based on religion. For instance, the Christmas festival at St. Lalibela, the Epiphany festival known at Gondar, the Ashendye festival known at Lasta Lalibela and surrounding areas, the true-cross finding festivals at Gishen, Kulbi Gebreal church in the eastern part of the country are among many religious resources that the country is proud of, and have made the country famous (Amhara bureau of culture and tourism, 2015). Due to these, the tourism industry has become more flourishing and provides ultimate benefits for the development of the industry. Tana Chirkos Monastery, and Kirstos Semra Monastery and their surroundings is one of the popular tourist destinations in Ethiopia's, Amhara Region in South Gondar Zone at Dera and Fogera Woreda. Tourism in these monasteries offers wide products to be seen. In recent years, the term religious tourism has become increasingly widespread in popular parlance however religious tourism is one of the least studied areas in tourism research, which is interesting as it is also the oldest form of tourism (Timothy & Olsen, 2006; Vukonic, 2002 as cited in Fernandes et al., 2012).

There are many destinations and sites that are by their very nature of great religious, cultural, architectural, or historical value and thus of great interest to both domestic and foreign tourists (Nicolaidis, 2016). However, in Ethiopia, many cultural attractions or man-made attractions are not developed so far (Kauffmann, 2008). Even though the lifestyles, culture, beliefs, customs, and practices of the people directly and indirectly have the potential to attract lots of tourists for the development of the tourism sector in the South Gondar Zone, nothing has been done especially regarding the religious tourism development. Due to this, religious tourism has provoked the interest of many researchers and tourism practitioners and bodes well for the further development of this sector (Nicolaidis, 2016). Thus, the objectives of this study are to examine the issues that hinder religious tourism

development at the study area and to elaborate on the future prospects of religious tourism development at Tana Chirkos and St. Kirstos Semra Monasteries.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Research Approach

In order to gain the advantages of both and to offset the discrepancies of each, the study conducted both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gather information through different data instruments. Creswell (2014), explains that a mixed approach involves collecting both quantitative and qualitative data and he explained that the core assumption of this form of inquiry is that the combinations of quantitative and qualitative approaches provide a more complete understanding of a research problem than using either approach alone.

Study Population, Sampling Design and Technique

The target populations in the study were the religious leaders in the monasteries, in addition to experts within the zone and those knowledgeable about woreda culture, tourism office experts, visitors and woreda *Bête Kihinet* office leaders. According to SGZCTO, (2019), the maximum length of stay in these monasteries is one to four days and the average number of visitors who are visiting these monasteries and its surroundings are estimated to be 50,000 per year.

According to Yemane's formula for sample size:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$$

$$N = 50,000$$

$$e = 0.05$$

$$n = 395$$

Under this, the researcher got the appropriate number of respondents using available sampling methods.

Regarding the qualitative approach, there is no attempt to create a sample that is statistically representative of a population. Rather, people or cases are chosen using the purposive sampling method. The cases are selected on the basis of characteristics or experiences and research questions and will allow the researcher to study the research topic in-depth (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Considering the target population, 8 tourism

experts, 10 monastery leaders, 7 South Gondar Zone diocesan representatives were approached - a total of 25 respondents - to answer the research questions.

Data Analysis

The collected data were sorted and categorised in accordance to source and type. Data obtained through observation was described in text with the support of pictures. Data obtained through interviews with different key informants was analysed through explanatory and category methods. The results were then presented in the form of tables, graphs, charts and pictorial devices. The data from questionnaires (quantitative) were analysed with the help of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 22. Thus, the major findings of the study were presented using descriptive statistical methods such as frequency and percentage.

Results and Discussion: Contemporary Issues in Religious Tourism Development

Poorly Organised and Unsafe Accommodation Facilities for Religious Tourists

One of the main challenges for religious tourism development at Kirstos Semra and Tana Chirkos monasteries and their surroundings is accommodation. It is clearly known that this monastery is the home of lots of religious treasures with lots of religious tourists at the annual celebration days. Since Tana Chirkos is the place where Jewish practice was held, many tourists are motivated to explore it and Kirstos Semra is the female saint who prays for the devil. Religious tourists need to stay many days at the monasteries. However, most

interviewees agreed that the accommodation facilities are poor and unorganised due to a huge number of tourists and poor management abilities.

During the main annual religious festivals, looting is a common practice in these religious sites. Here in South Gondar Zone, Kirstos Semra monastery, Tana Chirkos monastery, Yared monastery and others are the very ancient religious site where religious tourism is highly practiced from time to time. It is a common practice to see looting by organised illegal thieves. Many religious tourists are worried regarding this challenge and do not want to explore such ancient monasteries during the annual festivals. One of the foreign tourists stated the following:

Ethiopians should give concern about their religious treasures and their accommodation facilities. Especially, monasteries in Lake Tana are the home of ancient heritages. Most of world scholars, and researchers suspect that every theory and future expectation is found here based on their research findings. Every tourist is not only here to visit some may come to check and find evidence of what has been said before. Most need to stay here more. Ethiopia is the place where many religious practices have been held before and after the birth of Jesus Christ. It is a miracle that the eye of the world is looking at these areas. Thus, there should be organised accommodation facilities.

Safety & security measurements are needed including public safety & security vehicles, foot patrols (uniformed), walk-through gates, sprinkler systems, fire, and burglar alarms, emergency phones located throughout the shrine, safety workshops, self-defense workshops etc (Farhat *et al.*, 2016). As early as 2007 Vidic suggested that if there is a desire for religious tourism to flourish and be practiced throughout the year, tourist facilities should be developed by the church, the local community and the local government.

Issues related to Lake Tana - Water Hyacinth / Emboch

As per observation and interviews with local communities and the monastery peoples, Lake Tana in Ethiopia has been massively affected by an invasive weed; the water hyacinth (known locally as 'Emboch'). This is causing

Table 1: Poorly Organised Accommodation Facilities

| Agreement | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------|------------|--------------|
| Strongly Disagree | 1 | .3 |
| Disagree | 78 | 19.7 |
| Neutral | 129 | 32.7 |
| Agree | 151 | 38.2 |
| Strongly Agree | 36 | 9.1 |
| Total | 395 | 100.0 |

Source: Author's compilation from primary source, 2019

Figure 1: Poor Bridge and Poorly Organised Accommodation Tent



Source: Author’s own, 2021

major problems in Ethiopia’s Lake Tana. It is a critical issue that could destroy religious tourism activities if solutions cannot arrive. This challenge has occurred since 2010. Since that time, the volume of Tana Lake is decreasing at an alarming rate from year to year. It is clearly known that Lake Tana is the home of religious treasures since ancient times. Religious tourism activities are now affected highly from time to time as the religious sites are intrinsically linked to the lake.

The lake basin is heavily affected by many watershed management problems, caused by overpopulation, poor cultivation and improper land use practices, deforestation and overgrazing and as a result, sediment depositions in the lakes and reservoirs are becoming major issues. One of the foreign tourists stated the following:

You Ethiopians are facing a very hard challenging problem for the outstanding heritage site. You missed Lake Tana means you missed your world heritage site and you missed everything. I fear that you may not solve this by you selves and you need to ask world tourism stakeholders like UNESCO and others. I know that it is an enemy of lots of rivers and lakes of the world.

| Table 2: Water Pollution | | |
|--------------------------|------------|---------|
| Agreement | Frequency | Percent |
| Strongly Disagree | 22 | 5.6% |
| Disagree | 5 | 1.3% |
| Neutral | 30 | 7.6% |
| Agree | 148 | 37.5% |
| Strongly Agree | 190 | 48.1% |
| Total | 395 | 100% |

Source: Author’s compilation from primary data, 2019

Water management challenges are many, caused by environmental issues such as the vulnerability of nature and its fragile equilibrium, global warming and climate change, excessive logging in tropical forests, overexploitation of natural resources and the destruction of ecosystems, man-made catastrophes like hazardous mining activities and frequent oil pollutions, and purely natural catastrophes (Kammeier, 2008). Thus, the Ecosystems of Lake Tana are being degraded through many high pressures including farmland which has contributed to the problem of land degradation and soil erosion.

Figure 2: Water Hyacinth / Enbochi and its Root

Source: Author's own, 2019

Figure 3: Remains of Burnt *Emboch*

Source: Author's own, 2020

The lake has been listed in the top 250 lake regions of Global Importance for Biodiversity. It has 28 species of fish, of which 21 are endemic. Commercially, the lake's most important fish include the large African barbs, Nile tilapia and African catfish. The annual commercial value of fish production at Lake Tana is about USD\$1.1 million. The potential fish production of the lake is estimated to be 13 000 tons yearly. But, its current fish production is less than 1000 tons a year. Recent studies show a serious decline in fish stocks due to the spread of the aquatic weed - water hyacinth - around fish spawning grounds. The weed forms thick mats that cover the open water. Recent data show that Lake Tana is critically infested with water hyacinth and it's putting the aquatic biodiversity at extreme risk.

In 2011, the Regional Environmental Bureau named water hyacinth as the most dangerous weed affecting Lake Tana. By then, about 20,000 hectares of the north-eastern shore of the lake was infested. In 2014, researchers found that about one-third of the lake's shoreline, around 128km, was invaded by water hyacinth. In just two years, the estimated coverage of the weed doubled from 20,000 to 40,000 hectares. The weed is now estimated to cover 50,000 hectares of the lake. To make matters worse, inflowing rivers carry heavy loads of soil and suspended sediment into the lake, which affects the water quality and creates favorable conditions for the spread of the weed. Water hyacinth (*Eichhornia Crassipes*), is an exotic free-floating invasive plant that is native to South America. People who tend aquariums and gardens are

Table 3: Political Unrest

| Agreement | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------|------------|--------------|
| Strongly Disagree | 5 | 1.3% |
| Disagree | - | - |
| Neutral | 44 | 11.1% |
| Agree | 48 | 12.2% |
| Strongly Agree | 298 | 75.4% |
| Total | 395 | 100.0 |

Source: Author's compilation from primary data, 2019

believed to have spread the plant inadvertently across the Atlantic to Africa and Asia. It restricts water flow, blocks sunlight from reaching native water plants and depletes the oxygen in the water - often choking aquatic animals like fish. It also has an economic impact by interfering with navigation, irrigation, power generation and fishery.

One of the religious fathers in the monastery of Tana Chirkos stated that, the local community and a religious person are always trying to burn this Water Hyacinth / Enbochi, though it is beyond human power. During the summer season it rejuvenates again within a short period of time as soon as it gets rain. Not only does it impact the water, has it put negative impacts for the cattle. While cows feed on Enboch they become thin and become infected with disease.

Political Unrest

Currently there is a great tension among the peoples of Ethiopia and the tourists who want to explore the Ethiopia. Tourism is a fragile industry and it needs great attention. Political unrest is a very challenging facing those who wish to move freely from place to place. Through currently there is the promising change in the government leaders throughout the country, there is still many people who seek to form a group based on their language and race. Political instability related with tourism can have very negative effects on tourism destinations which will decline in relation to the number of tourists who visit the destinations. This will bring suffering to the tourism industry - tourism is sensitive and a volatile industry and all of these effects of political instability such as armed attacks, civil wars, bombings, attacks on tourists, wars, change in government, threat

of war with another country, they all deter or obstruct the image of the destination through media reporting and government policies and even word of mouth reporting (Mohamed & Suleiman, 2011). One of the tourists illustrated this as follows:

Without peace, tourism practices cannot be undertaken. Peace is the vital precondition for every movement especially for tourists. You see! Tourists are coming here to visit your heritages. You need to have peace first to be visited. Currently, peace and security matters for the Ethiopian tourist destinations. Tourists are very sensitive for peace. When I am coming here, my families warned me not to go due to the peace and security problem.

Belay (2013) in their study of religious tourism potentials and challenges in Gishen Debre Kerbie assured that political unrest is one of the most prominent factors and issues which have a great impact on religious and spiritual tourism development, this agrees with the importance of Political Unrest as indicated in Table 3.

Seasonality and Dependency

Seasonality is a problem for the tourism and hospitality sector. Many religious tourism activities are based on the annual and monthly religious festivals in monasteries and churches. For instance, religious tourism in Kirstos Semra is based on the annual festival of Saint Kirstos Semra which is celebrated in May. However, some monasteries are also visited regardless of their annual festivals like Tana Chirkos monastery and other monasteries which are found in Lake Tana. The primary research suggests that for many of the respondents, seasonality is not a major issue, with 10% disagreeing and a further 42% having no opinion.

Table 4: Seasonal Dependency

| Agreement | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------|------------|--------------|
| Strongly Disagree | - | - |
| Disagree | 42 | 10.6% |
| Neutral | 167 | 42.3% |
| Agree | 139 | 35.2% |
| Strongly Agree | 47 | 11.9% |
| Total | 395 | 100.0 |

Source: Author's compilation from primary data, 2019

Table 5: Modernisation and Globalisation

| Agreement | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------|------------|--------------|
| Strongly Disagree | - | - |
| Disagree | 29 | 7.3% |
| Neutral | 42 | 10.6% |
| Agree | 147 | 37.2% |
| Strongly Agree | 177 | 44.8% |
| Total | 395 | 100.0 |

Source: Author's compilation from primary data, 2019

Globalisation and Modernisation

As per the research most interviewees agreed, that one of the major challenges for religious tourism development at the religious sites especially for ancient monasteries is globalisation and modernisation. 82% of survey respondents either agree or disagree that modernisation and globalisation are issues for the sites. Ancient peoples were tied to their religion and even sacrifices their lives for the sake of their religion. Most of the churches and monastery treasures of the country were preserved due to the unlimited commitment and scarifices of ancient religious fathers and peoples. However today, people are exposed to the negative effects of modernisation. Observation proves that most of the current youths are using their time looking and searching for developed nations' products and services. This leads to lack of practice in relation to their own culture, undermining what we have.

Despite the erosion of many religiously informed traditional practices by the forces of modernity and globalisation, religion, whether Traditional, Christian or Islam, still has a vital contribution to make to the progress of societies (Tsele, 2001). The majority of interviewees agreed that most people, especially youngsters are becoming affected by globalisation.

Poor Facilities and Weak Management Abilities to Run Religious Events

Tourism is the labor-intensive industry. Where there is a tourism activity, there is a movement of people from their usual environment to the new destination. Facilities are a key determinant factor that promote arrivals in

any tourism destination. Thus, improving infrastructure is essential in order to attract tourists to a destination (Phukan, Rahman & Devdutt, 2012). Tourists who are coming from different corners of the world have a variety of cultures, norms, traditions and beliefs. To manage these different types of tourists, skilled, professional and active tourism coordinators and managers are expected to exist during the tourism events.

According to the interviewees, though most were domestic tourists, there is a perception of poor management ability to conduct different religious tourism activities during the events:

Look at most tourism sectors, there are no right experts. Tourism activities need skilled and right professionals. Without skilled tourism and related manpower, heritages cannot be preserved, conserved, managed and used properly.

Even though all religious sites are part of a heritage environment, not all heritage sites are religious sites. Many of the challenges which religious site managers deal with on a daily basis are akin to the challenges facing managers at other types of tourist attractions. However, many religious site custodians rely on organisational structures largely unaffected by modern management trends. In fact, their management situations may exist in a management vacuum, where things are done by custom rather than focusing on specific goals or targets (Shackley 2005).

Despite a growing interest in religion and spiritual management, the management of religious sites has remained relatively unexplored. However, although

Table 6: Poor Facilities and Management Ability

| Agreement | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------|------------|--------------|
| Strongly Disagree | 5 | 1.3% |
| Disagree | 38 | 9.6% |
| Neutral | 141 | 35.7% |
| Agree | 163 | 41.3% |
| Strongly Agree | 48 | 12.2% |
| Total | 395 | 100.0 |

Source: Author's compilation from primary source, 2019

Figure 4: Current Condition of Museum - Small, Old and Poor; Researcher Near Tana Chirkos Pointing to Museum



Source: Author's own, 2019

managers must consider religious aspects in the planning and operation of their businesses, managers of religious sites are faced with a unique and difficult challenge that deserves special attention.

Observation and interviews ensured that unlike most tourist attractions, these monasteries are not managed with the sole aim of increasing the number of visitors or turning large profits. Many religious sites generate no revenue from visitors, and few generate sufficient income to cover operating costs. Interviews revealed that many of the monastery managers are religious leaders without any management training not to mention training with financial issues.

These issues may be considered 'secular' matters, and thus are preferred to be avoided by these organisations. The findings agrees with the study of Kauffmann in 2008 who found a similar situation in the central rift valley. The importance of getting religious tourism specialist experts is similar to the finding at Fruska Gora as identified by Vidic (2007). Therefore, having experts is needed. Most interviewees agreed that it is essential to

remember that many sacred sites represent inheritance and legacy, which constitute irreplaceable resources that require conservation and good management.

If officials of a particular faith view tourism in a positive manner, their associated sacred sites may be used to engage in pastoral or missionary activities or as a place of outreach for believers and non-believers, using tourism as a tool to reach goals. Positive views of tourism also determine whether or not place custodians will engage in dialog or cooperate with outside stakeholders in the area. If religious authorities view tourism in a negative light, tourism may be prohibited or restricted in some way (Olsen 2005).

Acculturation and Alteration

Acculturation is one of the major management issues for developing religious tourism at ancient religious sites. As depicted from religious fathers and tourism experts, there is a risk of alteration of spiritual and religious practices from time to time and this experience leads to failure in developing the religious treasures and their religious environment.

As observation proved, most of the religious tourists follow the cultural dressing style, the need to talk foreign language, however others act like foreign tourists, using English words while interacting with the local communities.

The study of Gorad *et al.*,2012 assures that the local community should be involved at different levels of a tourist attraction: they should act as stakeholders in terms of consultation, manipulation, decision making and implementation to avoid acculturation and alteration of culture. The results of Tala in a study of 2008 proved that transport companies (as an exeplar) which have a good product policy will take into account the activities and religious events of different areas and ensure the necessary services (number of vehicles) are provided. This type of consideration could mean additional income for local stakeholders.

Future Prospects for Religious Tourism Development

Spectacular Environment for Developing Resort and Attract Tourists

The area is wonderful in its spectacular nature. The majority of the monasteries is surrounded by the largest lake of Ethiopia, Lake Tana. Lake Tana is the source of endemic flora and fauna. Most respondents agreed that in and around these monasteries, tourists can enjoy watching these unique flora and fauna in the environment. The area can have the power to be a good site for developing resort facilities which would be a good opportunity for the development of religious tourism.

Figure 5: Poor Signpost at the Compound of Tana Chirkos Monastery



Source: Author’s own, 2022

There is a considerable range of factors that affect tourist flows to countries or resorts. Such flows are dependent on destination characteristics such as climate, scenery, services, religious and cultural attributes and amenities (Coshall, 2000; Kim & Richardson, 2003; Ibrahim & Gill, 2005). In fact, religious motives often co-exist with other motivations such as desires to get away from home, to relax, to spend time with family and loved ones, to discover and learn or to be entertained and to satisfy curiosity. Moreover, religious practices and visits to sacred places may be part of trips that were not, or at least not originally, motivated or devised as religious. Religious elements (practices, experiences, information) may even emerge on the road as persons, things, events or places are encountered on the way (Stausberg, 2011).

Table 7: Acculturation and Alteration

| Agreement | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------|------------|---------------|
| Strongly Disagree | - | - |
| Disagree | 13 | 3.3% |
| Neutral | 46 | 11.6% |
| Agree | 184 | 46.6% |
| Strongly Agree | 152 | 38.5% |
| Total | 395 | 100.0% |

Source: Author’s compilation from primary source, 2019

Table 8: Spectacular Environment

| Agreement | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------|------------|---------------|
| Strongly Disagree | 15 | 3.8% |
| Disagree | 12 | 3.0% |
| Neutral | 34 | 8.6% |
| Agree | 94 | 23.8% |
| Strongly Agree | 240 | 60.8% |
| Total | 395 | 100.0% |

Source: Author’s compilation from primary source, 2019

Figure 6: View of St.Kirstos Semra and Tana Chirkos Monastery from Afar



Source: Author’s own, 2022

Government Policies Regarding Tourism Growth

The most important mechanisms to make religious tourism develop at religious sites emanate from good government concerns and policies. As most tourism experts of the local government stated, the focus of government for a tourism site development is appreciable from time to time. According to their interpretation, there is a responsibility given to the local community and the local government to use and develop their religious site for religious tourism development purposes.

The development of themed routes as tourist attractions has gained prominence in recent years. One key aim of such routes, apart from attracting tourists to an area, is to connect several attractions that would independently not have the potential to entice visitors to spend time and money. Religious sites provide an important

underpinning to the basic tourism product not only at the religious destinations but also along the routes leading to them, which often attract those not travelling directly for religious purposes (Richards and Fernandes, 2007).

The studies of Olsen (2006), Morpeth (2011) and Shackly (2003) proved that strategies and policies are important elements in trying to achieve success in providing services for sacred and secular visitors to sites of significance for worship, culture and heritage, and recreation. The success of these policies and strategies depends on the ability, capacity and commitment of site guardians and managers to the needs of those visitors. Furthermore, policy and strategy practices have changed from being devolved from centre or core of governance to the more successful bottom-up approach of post-structural policy, planning and strategic discourse (Amore & Hall, 2016; Wiltshier & Griffiths, 2016)

Table 9: Government Policy

| Agreement | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------|------------|---------------|
| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 0.3% |
| Disagree | 19 | 4.8% |
| Neutral | 171 | 43.3% |
| Agree | 168 | 42.5% |
| Strongly Agree | 36 | 9.1% |
| Total | 395 | 100.0% |

Source: Author’s compilation from primary source, 2019

Table 10: Increase Visitors and Religious Tourists

| Agreement | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------|------------|---------------|
| Strongly Disagree | - | - |
| Disagree | 54 | 13.7% |
| Neutral | 209 | 52.9% |
| Agree | 123 | 31.1% |
| Strongly Agree | 9 | 2.3% |
| Total | 395 | 100.0% |

Source: Author’s compilation from primary source, 2019

Increase Visitors and Religious Tourists

As per the aggregate response of the respondents, it is desirable to see an increment of the awareness of the local community regarding the religious tourism development. The local community is always ready to celebrate the religious festivals in a memorable way and they are now becoming better informed about the global / international importance of the sites and understand about the benefits they may get from conserving the ancient monasteries and using them properly for religious tourism development.

Visitation for religious ceremonies, church meetings, and other religious conferences and organised activities takes place annually or as a jubilee at regular intervals of several years - possibly at different locations. In some sites, these activities have hardly any determinable influence on the development of the population, settlement, or economy of the religious centers. As a rule, relatively few local persons take part in activities in such periodic celebration sites in comparison to the constant stream of pilgrims that flow seasonally or throughout the entire year to regular religious sites (Rinschede, 1992).

Wiltshier and Griffiths (2016) in their study of management practices for the development of religious tourism sacred sites, found that religious sites are attractive to a large audience as part of individuals' need to belong, to associate, to consider worship, to grow as spiritual and sentient beings and to maintain evidence for all. Thus, sites need to be managed professionally as they are central elements which are relatively stable, protected physically and evidence of shared values and beliefs.

Generate Income and Create Job Opportunities

The religious tourism sites in this study are the most important sources of income for the local communities and their surrounding regions. In developing ethnic tourism, entrepreneurs play a powerful role in the commoditisation and marketing of ethnic culture (Yang & Wall, 2008). This is especially the case during the annual festivals of the Tana Chirkos monastery and other sites where lots of domestic and foreign tourists visit. Because of the sites, the local community can always benefit through providing and selling local drink and

food for the tourists; hiring mules from the local town to travel to the monastery; providing tour guiding service for the tourists, and; organising and managing religious festivals in collaboration with the local government. The attention given to small enterprises is numerically the most important part of the tourism economy, both in the developed and developing world (Rogerson, 2004; Ibrahim & Mas'ud, 2016).

One of local community members who is selling food and beverage service to the tourists stated the following:

During the annual festivals of Kirstos Semra, Tana Chirkos and other monasteries and churches, we are providing and selling different tourism products to the religious tourists. We the local communities are benefitting from such religious festivals. Actually, there are merchants who are coming from far areas to sell religious products. This means that this religious event is the source of income for the whole peoples of the country.

Sacred sites and their worshipping community welcome visitors for many reasons; an opportunity to showcase the building, an opportunity to generate income, share faith or enhance a sense of community. Visitors go to such sites because they offer a sacred space, which is perceived as 'unchanging' in a rapidly changing world. Sites often include some quiet space, a place to pray and often someone to talk to or the opportunity to get information about faith (Shackley, 2005). Dredge in 2006 suggested that the importance of building networks among government and private bodies, such as state authorities and religious bodies, in managing tourism sites has also been noted.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Conclusion

Religious tourism is becoming a huge industry for attracting tourists from different part of the world and changing the lives of the communities. The study was focused on investigating religious tourism development as a form of sustainable tourism development in the case of Kirstos Semra and Tana Chirkos monasteries, to examine the issues and future prospects. Kirstos Semera

is endowed with many natural and cultural religious tourism resources. While it is endowed with many unique attractions, there should be room to examine the impediments and prospects. This not only applies to Kirstos Semra Monastery; the site is also surrounded with other monasteries like Tana Chirkos Monastery, Saint Yared Monastery, and others. Tourists visit all of the monasteries since these all are found nearby.

Some of the future perspectives include generating income and creating job opportunities; increasing the awareness levels of the communities and religious tourists; the spectacular environment; current and future government policies regarding tourism growth. The key impediments are unorganised accommodation facilities, potential acculturation and alteration, poor management ability, environmental problems with water pollution and water hyacinth / embochi, seasonality, criminal activity.

Though religious tourism is a very broad area of tourism, the study area is highly new in this regard and offers a different focal point for the developing of religious and spiritual tourism. There are also lots of future opportunities for further development of religious, spiritual and healing tourism in this area and others. All of the related stakeholders should examine the potential challenges and combine in their efforts in solving them via strong integration and cooperation.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations are made for the sites / region:

South Gondar Zone culture and tourism office should focus primarily on marketing the tourism products which are found in and around the religious sites.

Researchers, academics and scholars should explore the religious sites - highlighting different issues based on the religious potential explored in this study.

The local community should preserve and conserve the religious sites and their treasures.

Fogera culture and tourism office should develop awareness in religious fathers and local communities regarding conservation principles of the religious site.

The tourism office and religious leaders should work together.

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