Challenges and prospects of lake Tana island monasteries as a tourist site since 1950’s: The case of Kebran Gabriel

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Nowadays, tourism plays pivotal role for economic and social development of many nations. It is considered as the world’s first investment movement of the 21st century. Thus, developing countries are giving due attention to service delivery industries like tourism that contributes a lot to their economy. Ethiopia has its own long centuries of history and rich culture. For instance, Amhara national regional state has been endowed with rare and endemic cultural and natural heritages. In this regard, the island monasteries of Lake Tana which are the green flower baskets of the lake have potentials for the development of tourism in the area but yet it is fully unexploited. Currently, tourism sector is facing multifaceted challenges, and it is attracting the intellectual gaze of many scholars from various disciplines. This article is a step in that direction. The grand objective of this article is to examine the historical vicissitude of tourism developments in the island monastery of Kebran Gabriel. Towards this end, archival sources are consulted and interview is made with informants. So, it is needless to say that this article attests the challenges and prospects of the island monastery of Kebran Gabriel as a tourist site since 1950’s.

Key words: Kebran Gabriel, treasury, attraction, preservation, museum.

INTRODUCTION

Although tourism is a recent phenomenon, its roots are as old as civilization itself. The imputes for people to travel in prehistoric period was in search of food and favorable climate, which changed for in the course of time for war, trade, economic gain, religious conviction and study. Tourism as an idea of spending some time for entertainment outside one’s residence is a recent phenomena. In the period before Industrial Revolution, the travel for entertainment was dominated by the upper class. Industrial revolution was a land mark for the developments of tourism because it brought advancement in transportation and communication that enabled the people to have access to tourist sites and it marked tourism not to be the issue of upper class by creating
new middle class (Ayalew 2009; Purafkarj 2007). 1

World tourism organization was set up in 1985 by United Nation to foster the activities of founding member states like Ethiopia in the preservation and conservation of heritages. Nowadays, tourism plays pivotal role for economic and social development of many nations. It is considered as the World’s first investment movement of the 21st century. Besides, in a more pronounced manner it is referred as “the industry of 21st century.” Thus, developing countries are giving due attention to service delivery industries like tourism that contributes a lot to their economy. But, this does not to mean that “tourism is a panacea for the economic crises of the developing world (Chaudhary 2009; Currin 2002).” 2

Ethiopia is found in what is known as Eastern Ear of Africa, has its own long centuries of history and rich culture; nowhere in Africa can one find such rich historical records, buildings and precious objects from medieval and later periods. Among the regional states in Ethiopia, Amhara national regional state has been endowed with very rare and endemic cultural and natural heritages. Since the region has a remarkable number of tourist attraction sites, it is referred as the heart land of Ethiopian world wonder. As a cultural and political seat of Ethiopia since the late 13th century, Amhara national regional state has many but yet fully unexploited very old virgin tourist attractions. However, the growth of new and safe pattern of communication and transportation made the inaccessible and hidden historical and cultural sites and treasures of the region possible.

It has been believed that Lake Tana was created by volcanic eruption during Cenozoic era around 2.5 million years ago and has been possessed 37 islands, 20 of them have monasteries endowed with fascinating historical and religious heritages. These island monasteries of Lake Tana are referred as the green flower baskets that have potentials for the development of tourism in the area (Cheesman 1968). 3 Although the lake and all of its unique island monasteries have to be the area of study, this paper confined only to explore the challenges and prospects of Kebran Gabriel as a tourist site. This is because despite monastery is hub of rich heritage collection of medieval period and near Bahir Dar town, it is the most unvisited and the heritages are at a very precarious condition. For the sake of convince, it is better to have comprehensive information about the historical vicissitudes of Kebran Gabriel before discussing its tourist attraction resources, challenges and prospects.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is done based on both primary and secondary sources. For this study, a purposeful sampling method was used to select informants who have remarkable knowledge about the issue so that their in-depth information gave optimal insight on the issue about which no or very little is known. The sample size has depended on the quality of information obtained from informants. In this study, ten key informants were selected and interviewed on the basis of their knowledge on the research issue. The researcher has used both unstructured interview and focused group discussion to acquire data from informants. Apart from this, archives and manuscripts are also consulted. The collected information is not an end by itself but a means to an end. Thus, the collected data was critically and skeptically analyzed through narrative and document analysis approach.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is clear that Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia in the 4th century (Abbink 2003). Following this, in the subsequent periods numerous churches and monasteries were built in different parts of Ethiopia. It was during the reign of Amde Seyon (r. 1314 to 1344) that the Christian kingdom had established firm social, political and religious influence into the area of Lake Tana. Since the 14th century the island monasteries of Lake Tana have been centers of monastic life known for their historical and religions heritages. Kebran Gabriel is the remarkable one in this regard (Abbink 2003; Mara 1972; Moore 1936; Tadesse 1972a,b). 4 Kebran Gabriel is located about 11 kilometers to the North West of Bahir Dar not at a far distance, which takes nearly about 45 minutes traveling by boat. It is an island lying of the hilltop which is covered by forest and has captivating landscape, surrounded by the lake and bordered with Entons to the south east and

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Ura Kidane Mehret to the north. Kebran Gabriel was founded during the reign of Amda Seyon by Abuna Zayohannes in 1321. Abuna Zayohannes was originally from the Shewa province called Mareha Beté arrived first in south Gondar especially in a place called Robit, where he found a couple (Za-Gabriel and his wife Kebra). After some days Abuna Zayohannes was moved to the island of Kebran where a python was worshipped by giving many sacrifices like goat, sheep, blood and milk. He killed the python in the island and made great endeavor to preach Christianity to mainland areas. Due to this, he encountered fierce opposition from the mainland Agaw ruler Jan-Cuhay, also called Zankimir. Jan-Cuhay arrested Abuna Zayohannes at a place called Amadamit. Later on, the abune was released with the involvement of the forces of Amda Seyon. After this, Amda Seyon was granted 

The Gabriel Church of Kebran was rebuilt first by Dawit II, popularly known as Libne Dingel (r.1508 to1540) and later by Iyasu I (r.1682 to1706). The latter built the church using well carved red stones brought from Gondar, lime from Yilmana-Densa and wood from Agaw Medir using tankwa (traditional boat made from papyrus) as means of transportation and the construction was completed within six years. The outside roof of the church is supported by 12 pillars made from carved stones, symbolizing the twelve apostles. In a room built connected to the wall east of the kidist kidisan (holy of holies) of the church, there is the grave of the founder of the monastery, Abuna Zayohannes. It was after a very long period of existence that only the thatched root of the church was replaced by corrugated iron sheets in 1963-1964 during the reign of Emperor Haile Sellasse. (Aalund 1985) The Gabriel church of Kebran is endowed with historical and religious heritages that enable it to be the principal tourist site among islands monasteries of Lake Tana.

Ethical monastic practices

The monks living in the monastery are now governed by the head of the monks. The head monk receives his spiritual administrative responsibilities by seating on the chair in which Abuna Zayohannes used to sit. The monastery is governed by different monks classified and empowered under the administration of the head monk. All the monks who live in the monastery have been practicing the monastic life as the old original ancient monastic life style tradition of Kebran Gabriel. No one lives in the monastery except monks who isolated themselves from the world dedicating their lives to God by limiting themselves and by standing all the difficult temptations they face and by practicing the spiritual monastic life as it is only allowed by the monastery. Women are not allowed to enter into the monastery because of religious reasons.

Tourist attraction resources

During the medieval period, Kebran Gabriel was the political and spiritual hub of the Christian empire. Its historical significance is even more quite evident particularly between the 14th and 16th century in maintaining the Christian faith against Muslim pressures. Since there was no strong invasion over the Lake Tana monasteries, the Ethiopia kings safely hide their treasures in the monasteries like Kebran. From its topography all the way to its old aged basic buildings and wondrous treasures which are beautiful work of art have potentials of attracting tourist.

In the courtyard of Kebran Gabriel, there are several historical and religious heritages kept in a treasury said to be built by emperor Fasiladas in 1664, which is currently serve as a museum. The heritages kept in this treasury are the icon of virgin Mary said to be painted by the apostle st. Luke, iron cloth that belonged to the founder of the monastery Abuna Zayohannes, emperor Iyasu I’s bed and sword, Negus Tekle Haymanot’s bunk bed, old wooden candle sticks, crown of some medieval kings starting from 14th to 17th centuries, Amda Seyon (r.1314 to1344), Eskindir (r.1478 to1495), Na’od (r.1495 to1508) and his wife, and I yasu I (r.1682 to1706), 17 cross made from gold, silver and bronze having embossed designs of Bét Giorgies of Lalibela, Aksum Tseyon church and Gondar castle, colorful cloaks of kings, ladder made during the construction of the treasury in 1664 and other old aged and valuable religious materials used in religious ceremonies.

The treasury of Kebran Gabriel is a stack for more than 174 holy manuscript books written from parchment in Ge’ez around 600 years ago. Among those holy manuscripts books written from parchment, ወጋለ ከጆ, Book of Hewi which was written in 1560’s during the reign of Serse Dingle (r.1563 to1597) from 200 goat’s skin is the most eye catching manuscript. The book is named

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6Gadil- a medieval manuscript written by Zayohannes who was the founder of Kebran Gabriel Monastery. It is a very valuable parchment manuscript about all aspects of the monastery. So, it can be cited as Gadil by Zayohannes, MS (monastery). Kebran Gabriel, ff. 38-41; Taddesse Tamrat, “A Short Note on the History of Pagan Resistance to the Ethiopian Church (14th and 15th centuries),” Journal of Ethiopian Studies 10.1(1972):145.


8Informants: Gebre Giyorgis and Fikre Mariam Wolde Samuel, interview with the author, 17 June 2013, Kebran Gabriel.

9Cheesman, 155.
Book of Hewi after the name of the writer Hewi, it weighted about 17 kilogram and deals with any aspects of the Ethiopian orthodox Christianity. (Abbas 2002; Ephraim 1983) 

It has been believed that some of these heritages are brought from mainland churches there for safe keeping during Moslem invasion and have never been returned. There are two bells in the monastery, one cast metal bell weighting about a hundred kilogram and bold inscriptions in Ge’ez language embossed round it and dedication, which roads “እስክለደስ፡” ከንጉሠ ዋንግሥት ወስመ፡” ዋንጉሠ ዋለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ውንጉሥት ዋለም፡” ዋንጉሠ ዋለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለም፡” ከንጉሠ ዋይለምILES:

Challenges affecting tourism development

As a tourist site Kebran Gabriel has been visited by foreign and domestic visitors. In the earlier period the monastery was visited by James Bruce and R.E. Chessman. Since the earlier period onwards people from different parts of Ethiopia visited the monastery. Up until the first half of the 20th century travel to the monastery was only possible through tankwa, made from papyrus by the Woyo community who live in the southern shores of Lake Tana. In the post liberation period, the imperial regime made great endeavors to make Bahir Dar as a tourist center of north western Ethiopia, due to its geographic proximity to Lake Tana and its island monasteries, Gondar and Lalibela. To realize this, the government built infrastructures to make access to the area possible through air and land transportation to visitors. (Seltene 1988).

The Italians during their occupation of Ethiopia (1935 to1941) introduced boat transportation on Lake Tana to supply provisions and firearms from their camp at Goregora to their soldiers to control areas of Gojjam. It was this episode that laid a good foundation or milestone to the establishment of Navigatana Company in 1950 for transportation on the lake basin, which makes the visit to the island monasteries somehow safe from the earlier periods. Moreover, the navigation company opened today’s Giony Hotel by repairing the Italian building to provide accommodation to visitors. So, this effort of the government had its own remarkable role to the increment of tourist flow to Bahir Dar in general and Kebran in particular. However, in the morrow of Ethiopian liberation, the local communities had paranoia attitude to foreigners, ferenje that perpetuated for some decades and concealed heritages even from the eyes of foreign nationals.

Ethiopia’s participation in the establishment of world tourism organization as a founding member state was an impetus for its efforts to develop the tourism industry. Following this, in 1993 Amhara national regional state cultural and tourism information bureau was setup in Bahir Dar to foster the development of tourism industry in the region through promotion, preservation and restoration of the tourist sites. It was those changes that took place in last quarter of the 20th century both in the international realm and national level could have in turn resulted increment of tourist flow to this monastery. The Figure 1 and Table 1 below show the increasing trends of tourists flow to Bahir Dar, the lake monasteries and Tiss Abay. (012: 69 to 76) But, this does not mean that suffice work is done to increase the flow of tourists to this site. As discussed in the foregoing discussion though Kebran Gabriel possess precious heritages, it does not fully exploit its potentials and the business generated from the tourism is insignificant. There are challenges that sapped the development of tourism and tourist flow to the monastery of Kebran Gabriel. These are:

Lack of infrastructure

Infrastructure is the principal element for the development of the tourism sector. The quality of transportation system is the determinate factor for the accessibility of tourist attracting areas. To this fact, because of lack of modern transportation service, tourist sites of Ethiopia in general and Kebran in particular had remained to be unknown to many visitors. Though from 1950 onwards a considerable effort have been made to foster the growing tourism industry from its initial stage, the transportation services...
Table 1. Tourists flow from 1996 to 2012.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>8,290</td>
<td>15,903</td>
<td>15,205</td>
<td>23,561</td>
<td>30,885</td>
<td>38,523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign</td>
<td>5,940</td>
<td>6,181</td>
<td>8,182</td>
<td>10,083</td>
<td>17,901</td>
<td>23,042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14,230</td>
<td>22,084</td>
<td>23,387</td>
<td>33,644</td>
<td>48,786</td>
<td>61,565</td>
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Problem of security

From the medieval period onwards the monastery used nature as its umbrella to defend itself from different wars held in the country and passed down to these days generation. The monastery has no guard equipped with gun to keep security. The government doesn’t allow the monastery to have weapons to protect it from robbers and other dangers. The measures that has been taken by the government on the robbers who theft heritages is very lax. The destruction of Mehal Zeghie Giyorgis monastery by fire on 15 March, 2010 within a very short period of time attests the less protection given to the monasteries.14

13 Ibid; Informants: Amelework Mamo and Birhanu Abebe, interview with the author, 21 June 2013, Bahir Dar.

14 Informants: Mulate Tarekegn and Yohannes Mesgan, interview with the author, 19 June 2013, Bahir Dar.
Females are not allowed to have entry to the monastery

Kebran Gabriel is open only to male visitors and females are obliged to stay in the port. This is because of the reason which could be read and understood from the written manuscript story of Abuna Zayohannes as “…አሜሃ ቕለት ከእኔ ከመ፡ ከስነት በእስት ይስተ፡ ወሴት ወኮነ በከመቃሉ ከስከ ይእዜ”, during that day females are condemned not to have entry to the monastery and it still works. This is to avoid temptation and to make the lives of monks appropriate. Abuna Zayohannes had built nearby island of Entons one year after the foundation of Kebran Gabriel for nuns. Mostly, men are less interested to visit the monastery since their partners (females) are unsecured in their stay at the port lonely. It has been affected the flow of tourist to the monastery.

Lack of museum

The monastery is the hub of historical and religious heritages. The heritages are kept in the treasury that was built during the reign of Fasilades which serve as a museum. The treasury is old aged, very narrow to display all heritages and unable to entertain more than five tourists, has no windows, the door is inadequate and shutter of which do not necessarily prevent the entry of pigeons, rats and dust.

Lake of proper promotion of the existing tourism resources: Currently, Even though the tourists flow to Kebran Gabriel and the business generated from it shows slow increment, it is insignificant as compared to its potentials. This is due to lack of proper promotion of its resources to both local and international community.

Problems related to ethics of tour guides

Tour guides provide misinformation for tourists such as confusing the location of the monastery as if it is only having building with hill top road with fill of hindrance, provide wrong information about the existing heritages resources of the monastery and they asked the monastery to pay commission to them. There are illegal tour operators who badly treated the tourists. The tour guides lacks language skills and know about every aspects of the monastery.

Lack of protection and preservation of heritages

Though the monastery possesses precious heritages, due attention is not given to the protection and preservation of those heritages. Since the treasury is very narrow to display and preserve all the heritages, some heritages are stored in another building where resources are unsafely preserved from natural and human threats. The mural paintings adorned on the wall of the church aged back to the 17th century which witnessed the artistic potentials of the past generation are scratched off from the wall, because of the aftertaste of bad temperature in the earlier periods. The preservation and protection is so bad that one feels a sense of responsibility to cast one’s voice for improvement.

The church is not open to visitors

The tourists have no chance to visit the inner part of the church and to see mural paintings adorned on its wall. For tourists the only chance they have is to visit the monastery compound, the museum and building of the church. It is for religious reason that the church is not open to visitors. However, tourists have been disappointed by the prohibition to see the mural paintings adorned on the wall of the church. Thus, tourist made a visit to other island monasteries where they can see the inner part of the church.

Lack of service and facilities

Since females are not allowed to get in to the monastery, they are forced to stay around the port and in their stay most of them are frustrated, because no quest house and others facilities are made available to them. Moreover, the water of Lake Tana around the monastery could not be used freely due to some aquatic problems. Many visitors are restricted from swimming in the water. The only possible way for male tourists is to visit the monastery and for females to stay in the port.

Financial constraint

For the development of service delivery industries like tourism, finance is the basic essence. The monastery lacks finance to built museum to preserve and display all of its heritages and to provide other facilities which address the interest of tourists.

Decline of the water of the Lake Tana

Sometimes the water volume of Lake Tana has been
diminished possibly due to the dry season and the utilization of the lake for different purpose like hydroelectric power, which in turn adversity affected the tourist flow and even disabled the monastery not to have relation with the main land areas.23

Prospects

The aforementioned factors adversely affected the monastery to exploit its potential for the development of tourism. Overcoming those challenges requires the joint collaboration and cooperation of many stake holders. The monks of the monastery have planned to build museum to display all heritages to the tourists. They also planned to build guest house at the port, to display the heritages kept in the museum for females who are denied to have entry through electronic devices and to provide other services that enable the tourists to stay for some time there. Bahir Dar city administration culture, tourism, labor and social affair office has made efforts to develop the tourism sector through giving training for two individual from each tourist site for about two days in every year, visit the sites to check the manner how the heritages are preserved, and promote heritages of each site through pamphlets and others. Amhara national regional State culture and tourism bureau in its own part is doing network plan of Lake Tana monasteries through which each monastery has a chance to be visited by tourists.

Moreover, it tries to make Bahir Dar as “a conference city for tourism”; to have a visit of sites like Gondar, Lalibela, Tiss Abay and others tourist have to first destined in Bahir Dar which in turn increase the flow of tourists to the island monasteries like Kebran Gabriel. So as to solve the problem of transportation, Lake Tana transport enterprise has been started to build standardized boats at its workshop at Goregora backed by mechanical engineering department of Bahir Dar University from theoretical design up to the practical work.24

Literatures mainly Amharic fiction written by Yismake Worku entitled “Dértogada”, played pivotal role in the promotion of Kebran Gabriel. In addition, nowadays, standardized hotels are being built in Bahir Dar that provides services to meet the interests of tourists, which enabled the tourists to stay for some days in Bahir Dar. However, tourists need to be aware that young people who did not get the necessary authorization to give a guide service may contact visitors to offer some assistance. Yet since such people have no ethical qualities and the necessary skills, it is not advisable to deal with them.

Therefore, the tourists need to make sure that the guide they contact is issued with badge that is stamped with the seal of Amhara national regional state tourism commission. Due to the above efforts of different bodies, there is a glimmer of hopes and bright prospect for the development of tourism and torrent flow of tourists to Kebran Gabriel. However, the restoration of wall paintings of the monastery needs dexterous response and it is necessary to cry alarm for improvement.

CONCLUSION

Though Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia in the 4th century, evangelization in Gojjam and Lake Tana area delayed until the 14th century. This was due to the fact that evangelization followed closely the expansion of the Christian state. In this regard, Kebran Gabriel is a good case in point. Its historical and religious heritages have survived down to the present day as a unique inheritance from the medieval period.

Despite the fact that different efforts have been made since the 1950’s to develop tourism, the tourist flow to Kebran Gabriel and the business generate from tourism is insignificant as compared to its potentials. This is because of the challenges that can be associated with human and natural threats. If different stake holders work jointly, it has a bright prospect for the development of tourism. As it is discussed above the monastery is the historical and spiritual library of Ethiopia. However, much attention and concern is not given for the protection and preservation of the monastery, the ancient wall paintings made from naturally squeezed flowers and leafs from the 17th century are being scratched off from the wall and the paintings are in every dangerous position resulted from the earlier leakage of water and bad temperature. Therefore, the preservation of this important part of the cultural legacy of the medieval period is a very heavy responsibility.

Conflict of Interests

The author(s) have not declared any conflict of interests

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Citation

