

## **Challenges of Religious Tourism Development: The Case of Gishen Mariam, Ethiopia**

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The main objective of this study was identifying the challenges of religious tourism development in Gishen Mariam, Ethiopia. In-depth interview with informants, visitor questionnaire survey, direct and participant observation and informal discussion were employed in order to gather the necessary data. Poor transport infrastructural development, absence of government attention, settlement, unsuitable church administrative structure, and absence of tourism product development were identified as main challenges that have been hindering religious tourism development in the study site. To make Gishen one of religious tourist destination road infrastructure should be developed by government. Besides church and people need to strive to develop religious tourism products.

*Key Words:* Religious Tourism, Challenges, Gishen Mariam

### **Introduction**

Religious tourism is as old as the religion itself and consequently it is the oldest form of tourism in the world (Karar, 2010, p. 99; Rinschede, 1992, p. 53). Smith (1992) and Shackley (2005) noted that most religions require, whatever the aim is, to visit holy places. A good example is the Zoroastrians (Sarahani and Musa, 2012), which motivated pilgrimages in ancient times, which is still going on un-interrupted today. Each year around 300-330 million tourists visit world's key religious sites (UNWTO, 2011a). In addition UNWTO (2011a) has reported that 60% of the world population practices a religion and these believers form demographic base of religious tourism. Many countries include religion in their census. It is estimated that there are approximately six hundred million national and international religious and spiritual voyages in the world, of which 40% take place in Europe and around half of which in Asia and the rest is in other continents of the world (UNWTO, 2011a).

The three major religions in the world; Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, with a 33%, 21% and 14% worldwide followers respectively have received highest proportion of religious tourist in their headquarters (Rojo, 2007). For instance, Israel which is important for all Christians, Muslim and Judaism received more than 2 million foreign visitors that make religious tourism backbone for Israel's economy (Sizer, 1999, p. 85). Makah origin and center for Islamic religion received more than 2

million of pilgrims from different countries of the world which makes religious tourism to be the second GDP contributor of Saudi economy next to oil (Ahmed, 1992). Rome origin and center for Catholic Christianity has received more than 10 million religious and cultural tourists from everywhere especially from Europe and America. Gua and Velankani, and India have annually attracted one million and 500,000 pilgrims respectively; and 100,000 in both Sri Lanka and Philippines (Stirrat 1988 cited in Rinschede, 1992).

Though noted for its tourism potential and unknown statistics for religious tourism, Africa's underdeveloped tourism sector is attracting 5.2% (49.4 million) of the total tourist arrived in 2011 in the world (UNWTO, 2011b). According to Ighobor and Haidara (2012), in Africa around 7.7 million people are employed in the tourism sector. They also noted that tourism is contributing an average of 9% GDP to East African countries' economy. However, infrastructural problem and lack of innovations are challenging the tourism sector in Africa (Ibid). In the missionary countries of Africa Catholic pilgrimage sites have developed and partially built upon the traditional beliefs (Rinschede, 1992).

Ethiopia has huge tourism potential: natural, cultural and other tourism resources (Mulugeta Feseha, 2011). Tourist arrival is increasing from time to time despite its poor performance compared to other countries with less tourism potential. For instance, according to the MoCT report, Ethiopia received 584,490 international tourists in the year

2011/12 which has 20% increase over the number of tourists in 2010 which was 468,305 (MoCT, 2012). Tourism is the third export earner next to coffee and oil seeds, claiming an average of 23.34% of the total export earnings from 1995 to 2007 (Ayalew Sisay, 2009). Nevertheless, the tourism industry has faced different challenges as Yabibal Mulualem (2010) listed; poor infrastructural development, security issues, low promotion, lack of trained man power in the field of tourism and low tourist facilities development were some of factors for the tourism development in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia is known to be home of the two major religions: Christianity and Islamic. Muslim religious tourism practice however is not developed due to different reasons and that should be developed. Christians' religious tourism or travel to religious sites is encouraging which constitutes the biggest share of domestic tourism in the country. Travel for annual Saints festival and for passing fasting seasons while praying in monasteries are the most common practices of EOTC religion followers. However, famous religious sites in Ethiopia have been mostly visited and well promoted for their historical and archaeological value than for their religious importance; for instance, Axum and Lalibela. Only religious festivals such as *Mesqel* and *Timket* are being promoted for their religious tourism importance. Religious tourism sites are the main attractions for domestic tourists.

Most of the religious tourism sites in Ethiopia belong to Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC). Hence, Churches and monasteries have been seasonally visited mainly by EOTC followers. They are ancient and source for studying Ethiopian civilization, history and literature. EOTC holds many historical and religious treasures that are internationally significant. However, few are recognized and visited by both international and domestic tourists. Whereas many of them that could be listed under UNESCO world heritage are not well recognized and still not visited. One of these is Gishen Debre Kerbe Mariam Church, ancient historic, full of tourism potential site and one of the top pilgrimage sites in Ethiopia (Gedecho and Yebo, 2014).

Though Gishen has huge tourism potential that could make it one of the top religious tourism sites in the world and benefit many stakeholders, tourism in Gishen is not well developed due to different challenges and problems. Some of these includes; poor infrastructural development, absence or poor promotion, absence of tourist facilities, less attention given to the study site, seasonality etc. As a result, visitation is mostly done by domestic on annual festival from September 25 until October 5.

Economic dependency, overcrowdings, shortage of clean and portable water, price increase, and outbreak of water related disease such as, cholera have been observed by the researcher for the last eight years as permanent participant on annual festivals. In addition to this some religious rules and sanctions have been broken and illegal activities as well as drug trafficking has been taken place due to inability of managing negative impact as result of overcrowding (SWD, 2007).

Religious tourism is foreign exchange earner. Through spurring investments in new infrastructure; bringing competition between local firms and firms in other tourist countries; stimulating other economic industries through direct, indirect and induced effects; it generates employment and increases income, causes positive exploitation of economies of scale in national firms (Cohen, 1984; Karar, 2010; Pratt, 2011; Vuonic, 1998). However, Government and NGOs are focusing on enabling local community sustaining their life through agriculture (safety-net programs) and they didn't see tourism's potential in fostering local economy as Rotherham (2007) has stated where religious tourism as being one important engine for improving local economy. From religious heritage conservation point of view, religious tourism development in such heritage rich area could also sustain the church heritage conservation. Hence religious tourism should be taken as an alternative to improve the local community's economy and to conserve heritages of the area.

Different researchers and authors have conducted and wrote articles and papers regarding EOTC's contribution to tourism development, civilization, conservation and arts of Ethiopia (Alemayehu Wassie, 2008; Getachew Deme, 2012; Hingabu Hordofa, 2011; and Mezmur Tsegaye, 2011). In addition research related to challenges and opportunities of eco-tourism has been conducted by some few researchers (Gebeyaw Ambelu, 2011; Kauffmann, 2008; Yabibal Mulualem, 2010). Neither of the two groups of researchers could address the problem of religious tourism in general and Gishen Mariam in particular. Moreover, Research was carried out by South Wollo Diocese (2007) and Said Ali (2010), but neither of them focuses on religious tourism development. They rather focused on socioeconomic status and conflict resolution areas. Therefore, it can be said that there is a research gap in identifying religious tourism potential, challenges and prospects of Gishen Debre Kerbe Mariam, which needs to be filled with empirical evidences.

This study assumes that reducing challenges is the most important practice for sustainable religious tourism development in Gishen Debre Kerbe

Mariam. Based on this assumption, this study has tried to find out what challenges of religious tourism development in Gishen Debre Kerbe Mariam.

### Literature Review

Road safety and security is one of the concerns of visitors while they are traveling (Wilkis, Watson and Faulks, 1999). Until lately, safety and security issues had never been concern of pilgrims, it is now being changed to gaining of concern by religious tourist. For instance in Israel and Palestine places where there was no peace, visitors are not allowed for visiting (Suleiman and Mohammed, 2010). This is for the sake of safety and politics. Safety or perceived safety is one factor that determines choices of tourist to a particular destination. Tourist would go for a holiday to a destination when they perceive that destination is safe rather than worrying for safety once they are on holiday. The survey in UK in 1994 supports this idea in which more than 43% who traveled to New York had concern on safety of destination (Allen, 1999). For instance, in destination with high rate of crime due to different offences such as murdering, serious assault, and rape can gain lot of media attention and can affect the tourist choices.

Political instability and civil war are other factors that impede tourism development. For example, Suleiman and Mohammed (2010) noted that conflict between Israeli and Palestinian has affected the tourism in Palestine especially in east Jerusalem. In addition, war was the factor that affected tourism in Croatia in the early 1990's (Curie, Skare and Loncare, 2004). It was the major factor for US \$5B decline of tourism contribution to economy of Croatia within war period of 1991-1995 (Curie, *et al.*, 2004). War was also responsible for the decline of both tourist flow and the revenue gain from tourism during civil war in Ethiopia (Ayalew Sisay, 2009).

Terrorism is also another challenge that has been affecting the tourism industry in the world in general. Due to terrorist attack in New York in 2001 at trade center and in Bali in 2002, the tourism industry was reduced by 0.6% worldwide (UNWTO, 2002). More recently, terrorist attack at Afar region on foreign tourist was feared to affect the tourism in Ethiopia (Associated Press, January 18, 2012).

According to UNWTO (2011b) report, countries with developed infrastructure receive more tourist than countries with poor infrastructural development. For instance, According to Ighobor and Haidara (2012), infrastructural problem was one of the greatest challenges for tourism development in East Africa. Some of the infrastructural problems include: absence of telecommunication and electricity

services, absence or poor quality road, health centers, lack of sanitary water etc. Vuconic (1998) recommended that infrastructure development is very important for meeting all need of religious tourist.

Planning and implementing to have religious tourism business without product development is challenge because nothing can be done without products. Providing these products with unfair price could cause challenge for development of tourism business in particular destinations. For instance, this problem was noticed in Ethiopia as challenge or determinant factor for low number of tourist arrival comparing with neighboring country such as Kenya (Yabibal Mulalem, 2010). Poor methods and lack of innovative techniques in promotion of tourism business in developing countries of Africa hinder tourism sector's contribution to economy of each country (Ighobor and Haidara, 2012). In developed countries such as Spain, Portugal and Italy they have more lists of pilgrimages and religious festivals in their promotional literature than any other countries did (Nolan and Nolan, 1992).

Religious tourism is bounded to certain seasonality though some have potential to be visited every day. According to Rinschede (1992), three factors are responsible for seasonality characteristics of the religious tourism: One, religious ceremonies and commemorations day; two, climatic conditions/locations of the pilgrimage sites; and three, work calendar. Cuccia and Rizzo (2011) found that seasonality was one of the features in cultural tourism practice in Sicily and it was the cause for overcrowding and unsustainable tourism practice in the study area. They had recommended that de-seasonality through policy intervention is needed in destination that are affected by seasonality (*ibid*). Therefore, it can be minimized through different mechanisms such as tax reduction on the off seasons, high promotion campaign, provide regulation that limits the number of visitors in particular destination, etc.

Andereck *et al.* (2005) discussed that local residence could have positive attitude towards tourism if they obtain benefit from tourism otherwise they perceived negatively as a result they are no more supporter of tourism development in destination. Andereck *et al.* (2005), conclude that in order to develop positive perception on local community, provision of positive benefit to the local residents leaving around the destination need to be benefited (*ibid*). In addition to this, residents whose religious and cultural heritage is positively portrayed by the tourism destination would be more likely to support tourism development than would those whose religious and cultural heritage is ignored.

Public participation in tourism has different advantages such as; conservation, sustainable development, pride, effectiveness on the planning and the implementation of tourism developments and projects (Sanchez, 2009; Stem *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, local resident participation in tourism development is important for sustainable development of religious tourism.

Religious tourism is very prone to negative social impacts such as violation of rules (Rinschede, 1992). Vuconic (1998) explains how discovery of a holy shrine in 1981 resulted in a sudden growth of private accommodation and in land price inflation. Since, many religious sites receive many tourist/pilgrims on some occasions like festivals, negative impact during this time is huge as compared to other times. Some of the negative impacts include: leakage, degradation, violation of rules and regulations, conflict between community and tourist/pilgrims etc (Camamba, 2003).

## Methodology

### Site Description

Gishen Debre Kerbe Mariam is located 482 km north of Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, in Amhara regional state, South Wollo zonal administration, Ambasel Woreda. It is located in a cross shaped mountain with an altitude of more than 3000 meters above sea level. It has an area of 26

hectare, of which 90% of the land is suitable for building whereas the rest 10% requires study. Since the cross shaped mountain is surrounded by hills, expanding its ownership down the mountain is unthinkable hence the only option remains utilizing the available land appropriately.

### Data Collection Instruments

**Informant interview** through semi structural interview was another data collection instrument. Two informants from church, three informants from government offices and two from local people were participated. They were chosen based on the knowledge they have with the subject matter.

**Observation (passive and active):** was made in order to enumerate and take inventory of religious tourism resources and products, and to see impact of religious tourism in and around the study area. Researcher's last eight years continuous participant observation on annual festival on *Meskerem 21* (October 1) was used as an input to this research. In addition to this, some tour operators and travel agents website who sell Ethiopia's tourism product was visited in order to see their contribution for development and promotion of the study area. Out of the total 44 tour operators that had website, 30 websites were purposely chosen, visited and checked whether they market Gishen Mariam under their websites.



Figure 1: Participant Observation (Photos by Deacon Eyasu and Yosef)

**Self-Administered Questionnaire Survey:** this was made with pilgrims/tourists and gave information about the pilgrim motivation, length of stay, whether they come to Gishen Mariam other than the peak

season and the reasons if they don't come, their level of expectation and actual experience, the problem they encountered while they are in the study area, their recommendation for betterment of study area

etc. It was pre-tested and amended before the actual questionnaire survey was made. Available sampling technique was employed in choosing respondents. Participants in visitor questionnaire survey were selected using availability sampling technique. According to Bantalem Tadesse (2010) and WHO (2010) the maximum length of stay in the destination was one to nine days and visitors number was estimated to be 350,000-500,000 per year. Considering visitors' length of stay and number of arrival trend, the researcher took 200 samples. The way the questionnaires were distributed was based on accessibility and willingness of pilgrims to fill the questionnaire

In addition to these, tools such as informal discussion with different pilgrims, friends and experts, and reviewing secondary data including reports, printed and electronic Medias and books were used in gathering the necessary information.

### Data Analysis

All data gathered through visitor questionnaire survey were coded, entered and analyzed in Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20. Frequency distribution, central tendencies and dispersion were computed in order to show respondent characteristics and their opinion to different questions. Cross tabulation was also computed in order to show the relationship between two different variables. Qualitative data was analyzed through categorical and explanatory analysis technique. Data obtained through observation was described in text with the support of pictures. Data obtained through interview with different key informants was analyzed through explanatory and category methods. Some of the results were then presented in forms of tables, graphs, charts and pictorial devices.

### Result and Discussion

#### Respondent Characteristics

In order to gather data from religious tourists and/or pilgrims, 200 samples were taken non-randomly. But only 177 filled questionnaires were taken into analysis. Out of the 177 respondents, 63% of them were male and 37% were female. In terms of age composition, majority of respondents were between the age of 18 and 30 (50.6%), followed by age groups between 30 and 45 age (37.6%), above 45 (9.6%) and below 18 (2.2%). Except two respondents who did not mention their religious affiliation, all respondents were EOTC religion followers. In terms of their

origin, 68 % were from Addis Ababa whereas 32% were from 30 different towns of Ethiopia. Hence it can be said that 100% respondents were from Ethiopia. International visitors were not seen during the study on either of the two top festivals (October and January). This indicates that there are more things to be done in order to attract international visitors. 90% of respondent were religiously motivated whereas 7% and 3% were motivated by both and non-religious factors respectively.

Maximum length of stay was nine days whereas the minimum length of stay was an overnight. Average length of stay of respondents was 6 days. Mode and median is 5.5 days. However, this doesn't represent pilgrims or religious tourists who went on January or other time of the year. Respondent behavior in terms of their organization, 53.1% were in groups, 18.6% with friends, 17.5% with family and those who visit Gishen Mariam alone were 10.7% of the respondents. The result found agreed with the finding of Rinschede (1992) stated "the least group are those who come alone". Organized group trip is organized by parish churches, Sunday schools and spiritual associations.

In general 70% of the respondents were at least for their second time and at most for their 20<sup>th</sup> time. This implies that many of the respondents at least know about the study area more than one time and have knowledge about Gishen Mariam. Therefore, the questions that were prepared were filled with knowledge.

Respondents answered to the question what means of transport they used; the result showed majority of respondents used bus as means of transportation (75 percent). The other means of transports besides bus were partly on foot (13.6%), private car (7.3%) and on foot and animal (horses or mules) (4.6%). Those who went on foot partly or as the whole were due to the following reasons. Out of the 16% of respondents who went Gishen on their foot, 9.5% of them were just for being blessed and be part of the covenant written in the *metshafe tefut* (book of history) stated as "*for whom, who come on foot to Gishen having money for transportation shall be rewarded more than the one who come by vehicle or animal*". Shortage of money for transportation for 3% of respondents and other reasons such as accomplishing vow for 2.3% of respondents were reasons in using their foot as means of transportation.

#### Challenges of Religious Tourism

##### Poor Performance in Marketing

With regard to product development only the following services were provided seasonally by the local people; horse renting, church service, food and beverage. Most pilgrims suggested that tourism products such as tourist facilities, infrastructure and other are needed to be created throughout the year. Some of the potential products that have to be developed include: confession service, guiding service, mountain trekking, guided visit to the caves, spiritual advice, preaching and education, baptizing or providing church health treatment etc.

With regard to price, church service in all Ethiopian orthodox churches is provided free of charge. Likewise, the church services such as mass service, community praying, preaching and teaching are provided with free of charge at Gishen Mariam. Most products that were provided not by the church are with charges. For instance; horse renting, house renting, food and beverage, souvenir products were provided by individuals who were from local

residents and or outside from Gishen. It was able to check and assess the fairness of price of the products through participant observation and visitor questionnaire survey.

**Promotional limitation**

Promotion is very vital component of tourism business development and marketing. Effective promotion can motivate tourist visit to a particular destination even if there is infrastructural problem (Kauffmann, 2008). Promotion becomes effective whenever promotion is done through targeting the potential customers using appropriate Media. In this regard, as it was able to see different stakeholders' contribution in promoting the study site, lack of effective and powerful promotion is one of the main challenges for low level of religious tourism development in Gishen Mariam.

Table 1: Tour Operators' contribution

Items	Count	Per cent
Have fixed package tour to Gishen Mariam (annually)	1	3.3
Include Gishen with northern route itinerary	1	3.3
Full coverage on website about Gishen Mariam	0	0
Mentioned Gishen under title of <i>Mesqel</i> to say " <i>Mesqel</i> is celebrated to signify the burring of True Cross in Gishen Mariam	5	16.7

Source: Survey; Ermias Kifle, 2013

The analysis shown in table 1 above, from visiting websites of tour operators and travel agents revealed that there were only two tour operators that were promoting and included Gishen in the itinerary. One of the two was selling Gishen at any time of the year while other was selling on annual festival on October and January alone. As 30 tour operators have

purposely visited to promote other historic and cultural attractions in their page, none of them were promoting Gishen Mariam giving full coverage. 5 (16.7%) tour operators wrote about Gishen under title of *Mesqel* to say "*Mesqel* is celebrated to signify the burying of True Cross in Gishen Mariam".

Table 2: Activities of the Ambasel Woreda Culture and Tourism Office

Year	Activities
2009	1000 pamphlet
2010	1000 pamphlet were distributed to pilgrims, documenting through video
2011	1500 pamphlets were distributed
2012	Create awareness about providing good service

Source: AWCT office annual reports (2009 - 2012)

The two main activities of the Ambasel Woreda Culture and Tourism Office regarding Gishen were promotion and tourist survey. The way they promote was only using pamphlets and leaflets (table 2). For

instance according to an informant from AWCT office, nearly 1000 leaflets that narrate history of Gishen and news about building museum were distributed to the pilgrims and the businessmen on

October, 2012 (interview, 01-2013). These pamphlets and leaflets were prepared only in Amharic language; this means, the target market was only domestic. They had three limitations: 1) there was no pamphlet distribution on the other period of the year other than on *Meskerem*, 2) pamphlets were distributed only in Gishen, and 3) they were prepared in Amharic language alone.

However, zonal tourism department has used different promotional campaign but it had limitations. An informant from SWCT said that they have been promoting Gishen in bazaars in Dessie, and they used calendars, billboards and full stands.

The church administration does announce the event using television. An informant from the *Sebeka Gubae* answered to the question whether the church promotes the study site or not as:

*...Yes, we annually announce about the religious festival on meskerem using Ethiopian television. However, we paid and needed to promote Gishen in a way that can enhance tourism development in Gishen Mariam but the Ethiopian Television doesn't promote it like we want it to be promoted (Interview, 01-2013)*

The promotion was done after the religious festival was over. They don't do any promotion campaign in order to attract many religious tourists. Therefore, from this it can be said that the church administration lacks commitment in developing and making Gishen Mariam conducive for religious tourists. Perhaps this could be due to their lack of knowledge or understanding about the importance of religious tourism.

From the researcher's personal observation, Gishen was advertised in different regions of Ethiopia by churches found especially in urban areas. They organize trips with fair price and then post in different places where they can attract many pilgrims on *Meskerem* and *Tir* each year. However this was a good endeavor, it has limitations in that it is limited to certain season of the year.

Questionnaire survey analysis depicts that Word of mouth (information from family and friends) is the first ranked source of information for 38.5% respondents, followed by education (31.3%), other (24.6%) and Media (5.6%). From this result it can be said that media were the least source of information which could verify absence of promotion done by different stakeholders.

In general promotion was not done successfully in a way that targets both international and domestic visitors in motivating them to visit Gishen Mariam and make them visit the site at any time of the year. All the above mentioned stakeholders should have to promote Gishen Mariam to attract both international

and domestic tourist using appropriate Media continuously.

### ***Poor Transport and Health Infrastructural Development***

Infrastructure is a key determinant factor that promotes arrivals in any tourism destination. Thus improving infrastructure is essential in order to attract tourists to a destination (Phukan, Rahman and Devdutt, 2012).

**Transport infrastructure** is an essential component of successful religious tourism development in that it induces the creation of new attractions and the growth of existing ones (as cited in Khadaroo and Seetanah, 2007). On one hand it affects arrival and tourism development whenever there is no development on transport infrastructure. On the other hand, it is fundamental for development of other infrastructures in particular destination; for example in Ethiopia electricity wires is stretched following roads. What is observed and confirmed through interview and questionnaire is that absence of quality road and public transport affects travel to Gishen Mariam.

Majority of the respondents that constitute 86.5% didn't visit the site on the other season of the year except on *Meskerem*. Absence of public transport due to poor road quality was reason for 26% of respondents who didn't go or visit Gishen on other periods of the year except on *Meskerem* (Sep) and *Tir* (January). This means if there was no problem of transport and had good road quality these respondents would have come at any time of the year.

There were no air and railway transport infrastructures to Gishen Mariam. There was no regular public transportation service from either Dessie town or Kutaber to Gishen Mariam due to the poor quality road of Gishen Mariam. Transportation service from Dessie to Gishen Mariam has been provided on September/October and January (religious festival) only, because the road is operated during these periods of the year.

Opinion of respondents of religious tourists over road quality of Gishen Mariam showed that 37.3% "strongly disagree" and "disagree", 30% "partly agreed" and 27.1% "agree" and "strongly agree" with the statement stated as "Road quality of Gishen enables people to travel or make tour to Gishen Mariam at any time of the year". This implies that road quality and absence of regular transportation service have hindered them making travel to Gishen at any time of the year. Besides, most religious tourists in their recommendation said that transport infrastructure such as air transport development along with road quality improvement is needed.

**Health center** was not permanently and adequately serving at Gishen Mariam. Health station, located at the foot of the mountain is providing health service to Gishen kebele residents. However, due to lack of medicines and facilities besides its distance from the plateau, it has not been used by religious tourists and even by Gishen *Gote* residents as well (interview, 10-2012). Except on *Meskerem* church traditional health treatment through *Tsebel* is not provided on other periods of the year. Therefore, it is essential to improve the existing health centers in terms of human resource, health facilities and medicines.

### ***Absence and Low Level of Investment on Tourist Facilities***

In addition to poor infrastructural development, absence of tourist facilities was an obstacle for tour operators in order to bring international tourists to Gishen Mariam (informal discussion, 02-2013). The comments from religious tourists themselves support this idea, in their comment they recommended that tourist facilities should be developed. In addition to this, they also recommend for the church to invest money on providing guest houses and other important facilities at any time of the year.

Presence of bed rooms and restaurants are determinant factors for the presence or staying of tourists in specific destination. Even though, the number of hotels and beds in Ethiopia in general has been increasing they still are not satisfying the demand of the industry due to none-uniform distribution of hotels and beds. Most of the hotels and beds are located in big cities such as Addis Ababa. There was no bed in any house in the local hotels in Gishen, what they provide was only space after 10 pm for the overnight alone. Generally, there is lack of lodges, restaurants, super markets, cafes and other facilities in Gishen Mariam.

If religious tourism is needed to be flourished and practiced throughout the year tourist facilities should be developed by the church, the local community and the local government. As it has been cited by Vidic (2007), local communities were hosting religious tourists who went to monasteries, which in return have helped to reduce problem of accommodation. Similarly, local people residing down the mountain could also host religious tourists by building guest houses and hotels.

### ***Environmental Pollution and Begging***

Human waste was observed along the edge of each way, this has reduced the aesthetic nature of the environment and was disturbing pilgrims. Trials that had human waste were not chosen to pass/use unless

there was no way to pass. Smell was so bad which was really disturbing pilgrims who want to had pray in front of the church. Places where human wastes were observed include: in front of *Ye-Mariam wuha/Tsebel* outside the fence where pilgrims used as seating for community praying and preaching services during every evening.

According to Said Ali (2003 EC), 95% of the houses found on Gishen plateau had no toilets. As a result those who rented these houses were forced to use the two public toilets constructed by volunteers situated in front of Saint Marry Church and on the way to church Archangel Saint Gabriel. From these two toilets sludge was released directly to river downstream. The smell of these two toilets was bad.

Sound pollution was another problem caused by business tourists. Individual and organized group; CD, DVD and cassette sellers have been used high power audio device as personal selling promotion in front of churches where people are gathered for praying. Individuals selling spiritual songs; preaches; books; and neck and hand crosses were making the sound pollution while moving around. However certain organized groups were selling in selected places supposed to be far from churches, sound pollution seem to be inevitable. Some monks who came from different monasteries of Ethiopia were using speakers in order to teach and preach to pilgrims on *Meskerem* each year. They taught by overlapping on other teachers who were assigned by the church *Sebeka Gubae*. As a result, this was disturbing pilgrims who wanted to either pray or to learn.

Economic negative impacts such as price increase, dependency and commercialization were noticed during the study. Mariamawit Tassew (2012) found presence of trade and commerce in Kulubi as a cause for illegal religious practices of pilgrims and inflation of any goods and service such as transportation (p. 76). The interview made with local community revealed that they were dependent on the temporary job. According to the secretary of the church, Gishen is a place where livelihood of the local people is depending (interview, 01-2013). Building more houses was practiced in order to increase their income from renting which cause a threat to pilgrims as some said “we got lost space for shelter; why do they reduce building house?” Some others demanded “this is holy place, why do people commercialize?” (Interview, 10-2012).

... and Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money changers, and the seats of them that sold doves. And said unto them, it is written, my house shall be called the house of

*prayer; but you have made it a den of thieves.*  
Mathew 21:12-13

As Jesus said Gishen seems den of thieves and market place rather than praying place. If religious tourism is wanted to be real means for achieving church aim and boost local economy, religious practice should be outweigh than secular practice. Every activity should be based on plans.

Many religious tourists claimed and complained that begging was the boring practice done by local people as well as by people who come from other towns and villages of Ethiopia. They recommend for avoidance of begging practice from Gishen Mariam. Beggars were from different regions and town of the country: this includes from healthy to blind and crippled men and women.

The religious tourist questionnaire survey result showed that 26 percent of respondents didn't support the development of religious tourism at Gishen Mariam. For out of the total respondents, presence of environmental pollution and begging were reasons for 22 percent of respondents who were not supporting religious tourism development in Gishen Mariam. Besides, prominent informants were not also fully supporting religious tourism development especially they said that road shouldn't be constructed in order to prevent negative impacts and keep the grace of Gishen Mariam.

Compared to what Tewodros Yosef (2011) found in Addis Ababa, number of beggars is higher in Gishen which affects tourism. Begging is one of the challenges Ethiopian tourism faced (Yabibal Mulualem, 2010). It is not the only challenge observed in Gishen but also elsewhere in Ethiopia (Gebeyaw Ambelu, 2010; Kauffmann, 2008; Mariamawit Tassew, 2012)

### **Settlement**

Settlement has been a challenge for conservation of wildlife and tourism in national parks of Ethiopia (Hillman, 1993). It has been also a cause for conflict of interest among different stakeholders near and around big monasteries such as Monastery of Debre Libanos (Informal discussion, 03-2013). In Gishen it is the main obstacle and cause for conflict of interest among different stakeholders. From the researcher's observation and according to Ambasel Woreda Health Office report Gishen is a kebele whereby 5402 people are living in. Gishen Mariam is one *Gote* (sub kebele) whereby more than 755 individuals are living (telephone interview, 03-2013). Individuals settling in Gishen Mariam without considering monks and nuns can be seen in three categories: priests and deacons, none church servants and people whose residency is either in Addis Ababa or Dessie.

The first group comprises priests and deacons who were married and who have children. They have been serving in the five churches and have owned land in their name down in the *kebele* 023 of Ambasel Woreda. However, they have built houses and live on the church's land. Moreover, they are paid church servants and not freelance like monks. According to Said Ali (2003 EC.), they were living under the 93 (19%) houses which had been occupied during the study. The second group comprises non church servants who came to Gishen and remained with different reasons. Some of their reasons include: visiting relative, being government employees, having blood relations with persons who had been lived. Their way of life was similar to living in any town of Ethiopia. Some opened local grocery, while others are doing different activities. The third group comprises people living in Addis Ababa, Dessie and other towns of Ethiopia but illegally built and owned 396 (81%) houses (Said Ali, 2003 EC.). They built and owned house because they had close relation with church administration and or are native to Gishen Mariam (ibid). If this is going to continue to happen in the future, spaces that are free today would be occupied by illegally constructed houses.

Though the above three groups are important for the church service and heritage conservation as they claimed, but they are illegal settlers. Because the land they possess today in the plateau has never been belonged to them rather to the EOTC. Since its establishment, Gishen has been the church property not of individuals, unlike what residents have claimed (South Wollo Diocese, 2000 EC.). Zonal and Woreda government confirmed that the 26 hectare of land is the freely given land to the church not to individuals (interview). Current Federal Constitution of Ethiopia article 40 (3) gives absolute right to land owners to use the land they possessed exclusively. This land which EOTC has been possessing is under constitutional guarantee not to be snatched by anyone except by government (article 40 (4)). But what is happening in Gishen is the opposite; the residents and users of the land are illegal who should be asked by law, and in reality the land is not under guarantee. One government informant told that "the church has never asked for resettlement, everyone of the church administration member didn't see the impact, what they just saw and worry is about their current benefit". Another informant mentioned that "people who are members of the *Sebeka Gubae* were very reluctant to appeal to government in order to safeguard the land of the church".

As informant interview, questionnaire survey and personal observation revealed, this illegal settlement has been causing two effects; one it reduces areas sacredness and two, it makes the holy

places vulnerable to evil deeds. Each of these effects have different effects, for instance if people's respect to the sacred place of Gishen continue to reduce, there is no doubt that there wouldn't be religious practice on Gishen; this means no people would travel to Gishen each year any more. In other words, settlement has become the cause for happening or presence of different criminal offences and cause for conflict between monks and ordinary people (South Wollo Diocese, 2000 EC.; interview, 2013). As interview with some locals revealed, their presence in the church was illegal. One local who didn't want to mention his name said "We people living here are decreasing the grace of Gishen by our evil deeds" another individual has also said

*It is not good for us living with our families. We are doing the same as those people who live in town. I did this because I had no other option. If I were to get another means of livelihood it would be me who would first go out from Gishen (interview, 01-2013)*

On the other effect as the study conducted by the diocese justified there would be no guarantee for people living in the church to not become non orthodox because the federal constitution article 27 sub articles 2 and 3 gives to citizens freedom to change, follow, worship and expand their religion or believe. To confirm this, researcher was able to find some families who get changed their religious to protestant. This means that people who are living today at Gishen might perhaps change, follow and worship another religion. Therefore, if religious tourism is needed to be well developed, illegal settlement should be either banned or reduced.

### ***Lack of Trained Manpower in the Field of Religious Tourism***

According to Ambasel Woreda Culture and Tourism office (AWCT), there was only a single man who has training in tourism at the Woreda level (interview, 01-2013). In addition, there were no tour operators and tour guides who were trained in tourism at either zonal or at Woreda level. Moreover, there were no personnel who were specifically committed to religious tourism development and management at regional and federal level. According to researcher observation, it was able to know that there were even very few tourism experts at the zonal level, most of which were from history, management and other related fields.

Though there are universities and colleges that teach tourism as separate discipline, there is still gap in filling specialized human power that is well trained and concerned especially with religious tourism. By its nature religious tourism resource is easily prone to social negative impacts, in adjusting and reducing

such impact human resource that is well trained and specialized in religious tourism is needed. In this regard, it is indeed difficult to find a person who is trained in both theological and tourism disciplines. Rather we have persons who are qualified in either of the two disciplines; theology or tourism. Having the knowledge in both disciplines makes religious tourism destination area being easily manageable and thus would have sustainable religious tourism. Some of the problems that are noticed for example depict presence of such challenge in every place where religious tourism is being developed.

Some church staff of Gishen had less knowledge about religious tourism. The interview made with key informants witnessed the aforementioned statement: very prominent key informant in the church has understood tourism as completely negative industry by saying "I don't support tourism development in Gishen Mariam because I do believe that tourism will reduce glory of Gishen." in addition to this he said that road shouldn't be constructed because it would reduce the glory of Gishen. It is sure that if he had enough knowledge and understanding about religious tourism, he wouldn't have perceived tourism as it always causes negative things.

The finding agreed with what Kauffmann (2008) found in central rift valley. Particular to getting religious tourism specialist expert the finding is similar with finding at Fruska Gora in that it was a problem (Vidic, 2007). Therefore, having experts, local guides, specialties in religious tourism in general in the country and in specific in Gishen is needed.

### ***Absence and Unfair Local Community Involvement***

Lack of involving and benefiting local residents fairly has brought negative impact on religious tourism development in Gishen Mariam. According to AWSA office, road has been constructing with the involvement of local community of different *kebeles* in the Woreda. On the other hand as the report from Woreda tourism office shows 20 people were participated in establishing new bus station and parking near primary school west side of Gishen Mariam.

Some jobs such as providing security service, receiving guest and church service provision were occupied by local residents however local community haven't been yet fairly involved and benefited. To say local community is involved, they should have to be involved at different level of tourist attraction: they should act as stakeholders in terms of consultation, manipulation, decision making and implementation (Gorad *et al.*, 2012). Findings show that the church administration does exclusively

involve individuals who have blood relation with those who are leaders of the church (interview, 01-2013). In short, involvement of community was unfair; that was why some individuals have repeatedly complained that the church is not fairly involving everyone who has lived in the church, for instance monks and nuns.

Church is non-governmental institution whereby many individuals who are member of the churches are used and get services such as praying, mass services, baptism, confession, advice and so on fairly and equally. These days' churches are being built by local residents who are follower of EOTC religion. This has resulted in growing feeling of being own property among individual believers. As a result churches are property of EOTC followers, in which everybody have right to demand church service and give opinion for betterment of church service. One informant said "church leaders are corrupted. More than a million birr is gained from pilgrims each year but nothing positive change is seen so far. I think they are using the money for their personal purpose". Most of the monks and nuns had no budget for their daily life (food and drink). Some respondents to questionnaire survey have mentioned racial discrimination as the problem that shouldn't be seen in Gishen Mariam. With regard to gender involvement, it is still the big question left to the church administration. Therefore, it can be concluded that church administration should have to

involve every member of the church irrespective of what s/he is? What s/he has? From where is s/he?

### *Safety and Security Issues*

According to police officer of Gishen *Gote*, different criminal offences have been committed by different groups and individuals each year (interview, 01-2013). Some of the criminal offences that have been committed include: theft, rape, assault and murdering. Theft is the most criminal offence committed on visitors each year. As the result of tourist questionnaire survey showed, 7 (4%) religious tourists were victim of the criminal offence. Out of the seven religious tourists five were victim of theft and two were victim of assault. Only two of them were reported to police and evaluated the service as it was good. One rape case was registered on *Meskerem* 2005 EC. many assaults and bite on thefts were committed on *Meskerem* (interview, 01-2013).

Car accident on the way to Gishen Mariam starting from Dessie town is not surprising to happen. This is because of the inconvenient and low level quality of the road. In this Ethiopian academic year four car accidents have been registered. Two were registered on *Meskerem* while other two accidents on *Tir* (see picture 17). Two out of the four accidents, caused easy damage on human whereas the two caused damages on property.



Figure 2: Car Accidents registered on January, 2013 (photos by the author)

Unless there is an organized group, going alone by car could cost tourist time, money and life. It was people who were pulling cars that closed the road as shown in the picture 17.c. In addition, it would be difficult for un-experienced drivers and to those who don't know the road before in reaching and getting back safely without accident. Roads or bridge and

rivers such as *Teleyayen* and *Qundit* can damage cars easily especially during summer season.

According to the *Woreda* and zonal traffic police, trucks have been allowed in providing public transportation service. Because they provide the transportation service with cheap price/charge and some provide it freely for vow. Though it is good to

have such services but they are not recommended due to their negative health impact such as vulnerability to accident, eye problem, air born disease transmission, damage on body part etc (interview, 01-2013).

In order to minimize and prevent traffic problem having and assigning traffic polices at different spot is indispensable. Regarding the number of traffic polices assigned to Gishen, informant from AWSA said that they assigned traffic police from their office and traffic polices from different *Woredas* of South Wollo zone. In general, 26 traffic polices were assigned on *Meskerem* in this year (2012/2013). They were assigned in different spots starting from kutaber town until foot of Gishen Mountain where traffic problems are expected to happen. Only radio and mobile phone were used for communication. They stayed not for more than six days. To the question whether the number of security persons are enough or not, the informant answered that the number of security person assigned was enough to manage problems related to security and traffic that was why they managed capturing 26 thefts who were organized and stolen many mobiles and bags etc. Since these security persons were assigned temporarily, different security problems could perhaps took place upon their absence. Only two police officers are assigned permanently to manage the security related issues. This might not give confidence to tourist to travel to Gishen Mariam. Hence it is good if security persons are going permanently assigned at Gishen as well on ways to Gishen along with other developments.

According to Woreda agricultural office, 21% of Gishen *kebele* residents are food insecure. Veen (2000) reported that Ambasel Woreda is the frequently affected area by drought. Informal interview made with one of the Woreda agriculture office expert revealed that most of the direct supporters of government safety net program are from the Gishen *Gote* (they are monks and nuns). On the other hand, livelihood of monks and nuns has been depended on begging and getting temporary labor jobs once or twice a year. This might perhaps be a challenge to have religious development in such area. Tourists are not interested to spend their time visiting drought and poverty affected tourist destinations. Before they decided to make travel to particular destination they first check whether residents livelihood is good or not, if not they avoid poor areas for their vacation. Hence as much as possible local residents livelihood should be food secured.

### ***Inconvenient Institutional Structure***

With regard to church administration structure itself different stakeholders have complained that it has problem and it is the main cause for the happening of different evil deeds. Committee appointed by South Wollo Diocese in order to find out solutions to the conflict which is raised between the monks and ordinary people in 2000 EC, noted that there were people who demand of making Gishen Mariam a monastery (South Wollo Diocese, 2000 EC.). Similarly, religious tourists have commented on changing Gishen Mariam to a monastery because they think that being a monastery could make Gishen Mariam graceful place whereby only spiritual activities are being performed. In addition, Woreda and Zonal Tourism Offices were also saying the same thing. Moreover, the South Wollo Diocese decided to make Gishen Mariam a monastery following the suggestion and recommendation of the committee.

Unfortunately, the parish church and the local community have overridden the decision of South Wollo Diocese. It is because the study conducted by the committee was not inclusive of the ideas of the local residents, and as one informant from the *Sebeka Gubae* said the committee had no recognition from the parish church;

*First of all the committee is not recognized by the church, we don't know who they are therefore we didn't accept their finding. Next the diocese is saying get down from the church without providing any compensation...This is unfair! Why we leave our heritage and let it to others who could snatch all heritage Gishen posses? ... We prefer Gishen Mariam to be parish church* (interview, 01-2013).

Another informant who doesn't agree with changing Gishen Mariam to a monastery argued that it is not the right time to make Gishen a monastery because; one, there is no priest monk; two, there is no guaranty that heritages are not going to be snatched; three, there hasn't been any problem so far; four, local community has no demand of making Gishen Mariam a monastery since one church administration is changed to monastery whenever there is demand of local residents; and five, those who are monks today are not permanent residents and they are not originally from Gishen (interview, 12-04-2013).

On the contrary informants who supported making Gishen Mariam monastery argued that monastery administration structure is the best option to solve problem observed so far. Some of their reasons for making Gishen a monastery include:

1. Secular activities are outweighing the spiritual activities which shouldn't be. Spiritual activities are more worth than secular activities. This could be achieved if Gishen become a monastery.
2. There is a need to discourage illegal settlement which is a threat to lose ownership over the 26

hectare of land. The church has to be a monastery because it doesn't allow people settle in Gishen anymore.

3. Flourishing or encouraging tourist flow to Gishen throughout the year by providing religious tourism product is possible and better if Gishen become monastery.
4. There has been local government intervention on church issues for example, in matter where the church evicts illegal settler the local government has been intervened with the decision of the church. This could be ended if church structure is changed to monastery.
5. Geographically isolated. Places like Gishen Mariam are suitable for monastery than parish church.

On the other side, however its accountability had been to Woreda *Betekihnet* five and six years ago but since then it has been accountable to the South Wollo Diocese (interview, 01/2013). The reason why the church became under the diocese, an informant from Woreda *Betekihnet* replied as;

*Because the income of the parish church is bigger that could help to cover budget of other churches and monasteries under the diocese. Besides, it is difficult to manage and administer Gishen Mariam under Bêtekihnet (interview, 01-2013).*

With regard to whether the Woreda *Betekihnet* has complained on it or not, he said that they had no any complain with it, they rather even prefer Gishen be accountable to the *Menbere Patriarch* due to the complex problems of the parish church that it currently has faced. Nevertheless, being accountable to the diocese was an obstacle for the Woreda tourism office. According to informant from AWCT office, they couldn't do anything because jurisdiction and horizontal communication is being only with Woreda *Betekihnet* in which Gishen Mariam is not part of their responsibility to manage (interview, 01-2013). He added it is only the zonal tourism office that can do tourism activities at Gishen Mariam. To bold this problem informant from SWCT department said that it was indeed challenging their job not only to the Woreda tourism office.

Since good administration structure is essential for religious tourism development the researcher supports the views of informants who said the structure should be monastery for the above mentioned reasons.

### **Low Level of Government Attention**

Government commitment in promoting Gishen Mariam in all level of tourism sectors is very low or absent, less interested in improving road transport

infrastructure, in resettling illegal settlers and tourist facilities development.

To the question why Gishen hasn't never been a tourist destination, one informant from AWCT office answered that "Gishen has not been included in the tourist map of Ethiopia, absence of toilets and quality road" (interview, 01-2013). Besides to this regional government was reluctant in providing financial support to road construction though they appealed many times. On the other hand, one informant from the *Sebeka Gubae* answered to the above question, as:

*We wrote many letters to MoCT in order to register Gishen as one of the tourist destinations but no positive response. They asked us about the presence of hotels, guest house and restaurants as prerequisites. We have guest house for government officials and top religious leaders and servants not for pilgrims (interview, 01-2013).*

Tourism promotion experts of MoCT told that they don't have any detail information about Gishen Mariam. With regard to whether MoCT has plans to make Gishen Mariam one of the newly developed tourist destinations, a tourism destination development expert said that Gishen is not under their future plan. Another expert from the public relation of MoCT said "it is not our jurisdiction to promote or do any activity at Gishen Mariam unless request from regional tourism and park bureau" comes. One informant from EHRCA said that the problem was not only on government but also on the church administration. He added that government has not yet studied potentials of Gishen Mariam in detail due to lack of attention. Informal discussion revealed that government was wrongly understood development of religious tourism in general in the country.

Even looking at the zonal level, except Monastery of Hayq there is no any tourist destination developed which is being utilized by international tourist. The south Wollo zone tourism department is not doing any promotion and not making tourist destination sites accessible to tourists. Because researcher couldn't find any of the resources short listed under Amhara tourism and parks bureau. Therefore, the South Wollo zone tourism department should develop tourism destinations and promote them.

### **Conclusion**

The findings show that poor quality of road and absence of transportation services was reason for pilgrims not to come on the other time of the year. It is also reason for tour operators not to sell Gishen

Mariam to international tourists. Poor marketing efforts especially poor promotion campaign and absence of religious tourism products have been hidden tourism potential of Gishen Mariam. Settlement and inconvenient structure of the church has been contributing to secular practices and low level of spiritual activities. It is also the main cause for conflict between different stakeholders. Reluctance of church administration and lack of government attention in minimizing illegal settlement and in making Gishen Mariam accessible for tourists were another challenges.

### Recommendation

- Government should show its commitment in taking the initiative to construct asphalt road in order to increase arrival of tourist to the destination. Government should also know that the place potential place. Asphalted road that was intended to be constructed from Dessie to Tenta and Delanta via Kutaber should come in to ground in time. Because this road could at least reduce road problem and also could motivate volunteer EOTC followers to finish the remained 20 km road with asphalt. Its overall impact will become huge particularly in attracting international visitors at any time.
- Regarding the administrative structure of the church, unless Gishen Mariam is changed into monastery administrative structure, development of religious tourism is unthinkable, thus the present day church administration ought to be voluntary in changing Gishen to monastery. Meanwhile, since converting Gishen to monastery without moving out illegal settlers is not possible, government and the church have to sit together and try to resettle illegal settlers through negotiation or by providing compensation.
- Notwithstanding providing support to farmers, developing religious tourism in Gishen is an alternative means to alleviate poverty once for all. Religious tourism can also increase government revenue hence it should be given attention by all stakeholders to be developed.
- In providing tourist facilities church has to be open to tourists by providing tourist facilities. Some of the facilities include: guest house, restaurants, cafeteria, lodges, bath rooms, and other related services. All these need to be at least at standard level. Workers at these tourist facilities should be from local community.
- System of hosting religious tourist should be developed. For instance all commercial and

noncommercial accommodation establishments should be first registered and then provide their service according to the price the church fixed. The church then can easily monitor.

- There should be human resources that have knowledge of religious tourism so as to improve the service. This should be from both the government offices and church itself. In providing quality service, Woreda or zonal tourism office need to train local community on how to improve their service provision to the religious tourist.
- There should be strong marketing campaign especially promotion which should be done by different stakeholders such as tour operators and government tourism offices (Woreda to federal level).

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