

No Shelter:
UNESCO's efforts to save Lalibela's Culture

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Abstract

The eleven rock-hewn churches in Lalibela, Ethiopia have existed for almost a millennium. Cut directly from the volcanic rock of the area, the churches have attracted foreign attention for over fifty years to an area that still remains extremely rural. Recently, new attention is being given to the churches in an attempt to save them from deterioration that threatens both the structural integrity of the buildings and the priceless artwork inside. Leading the effort is the United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). UNESCO, with help from the European Union, has launched a new project to build metal shelters that will cover and protect several of the churches at risk. This project, however has encountered several problems with its design, budget, and construction, and has caused controversy among the local community. These problems have raised questions about the success of the project. UNESCO has however, been much more successful in their community based efforts to save the intangible heritage of the area. This project, which UNESCO is sponsoring, has effectively preserved traditional craft skills, while also generating income in an area affected by extreme poverty. By comparing these two projects, it becomes clear that UNESCO has had much more success when working directly with the community.

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Introduction

“I weary of writing more about these buildings, because it seems to me that I will not be believed if I write more ...”

Francisco Alvarez: 1540

When the Portuguese missionary Francisco Alvarez first visited the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, in the Lasta region of Ethiopia, he was worried that no one would believe him of their existence. The beauty and splendor of their design coupled with the mystery of their excavation, made these churches one of the great wonders of the world. Centuries later, long after Alvarez, these extraordinary monuments continue to baffle and intrigue both tourists and experts alike, and recently much attention has been given to efforts to protect and conserve the churches of Lalibela, in order to guarantee their survival into the new Ethiopian millennium.

Starting in the mid 1950's, and culminating in new structures being constructed today, Lalibela has continually been the focus of international heritage protection organizations. The most prominent of these organizations is the United Nations, Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This organization, who has made it its mission to protect world heritage sites, has led the efforts to protect not only the churches of Lalibela themselves, but also the intangible heritage of the surrounding community. Most recently UNESCO, at the request of the Ethiopian government and with funds from the European Union, has implemented the construction of four new metal structures that will cover and protect five of the churches from the corrosive effects of rain and sun. These structures which are due to be completed by late February, have created controversy amongst the local community and architectural

experts, for design changes and problems with construction that have occurred. Despite this controversy however, many agree in the necessity of the structures and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church itself, believes in the beneficiary nature of the preservation efforts.

The question remains however, has UNESCO been successful in protecting the cultural heritage of Lalibela? The United Nations has often been criticized for its inefficiency when dealing with culturally specific problems; so has enough attention been given to local efforts to preserve traditional art and ceremonies? Has the bureaucratic nature of such a large organization prevented it from recognizing local needs and concerns about the preservation of cultural heritage? When looking at UNESCO's activity in Lalibela it becomes clear that the organization has had much more success when working at the local level; and projects that work directly with the community have done a much better job at protecting the cultural heritage of the community. Lalibela exemplifies the need for large Non-Governmental Organizations, like UNESCO, to involve the local community directly in heritage preservation projects.

Methodology

The interesting thing about the situation in Lalibela is the large number of organizations involved, both Ethiopian and International. It was therefore important for me to understand the role all of them play in the efforts to preserve the churches. This required me to start my secondary research by first finding out who was involved and subsequently what their roles were in Lalibela. Because my focus was more on contemporary issues the Institute for Ethiopian Studies (IES) library had little to offer. I

had to, therefore, do most of my secondary research on the internet using both periodical search engines and the organizations involved websites.

After learning about the people involved, it was then necessary to set up interviews with representatives of these organizations. Because many of these groups are international in nature, they had offices in Addis Ababa. This meant that a large amount of my field research could be carried out in the city, talking to people in charge of the project. It was, however, necessary for me to go to Lalibela to see first hand the projects taking place.

On my first visit to Lalibela, Fasil Giorgis' lectures provided me with an extensive overview of the history of the churches themselves and the efforts to protect them. I also was introduced to Jacques Dubois, the founder of the UNESCO project intended to protect local artistic traditions. This knowledge would assist me on my following visit. While in Lalibela one month later, for my primary research, I used local community member contacts to help me meet people both involved in the projects and people with opinions about the projects. While there I talked to the people in charge of the construction of the shelters, representing the Italian contracting firm and the Ethiopian consultant firm. In order to understand the Orthodox Church's opinion I interviewed both the head of the church in Lalibela and a priest who has been a member of the church for over 50 years. These interviews allowed for the official and unofficial opinion of the Church, which is important in understanding the political implications of these projects. In order to understand the impact of tourism on the area, I talked to a representative in the Ministry of Tourism of the area, who also gave me information from the local municipality. Here I was given the current statistics of both flow of tourists and

investment in tourism in Lalibela. To learn about efforts to protect the intangible heritage I talked to the coordinator of the local UNESCO funded project and a local artist. These interviews, again allowed for different opinions on the issue of intangible heritage preservation.

I also conducted several informal interviews with community members about the issues of heritage protection and the effect of tourism on Lalibela. Because Lalibela is such a small community and is now just being affected by the foreign influences of both tourism and international organizations, it is important to understand the local perspective. These interviews, which were often carried out in a group consisting of guides and artists, allowed me to learn the local concerns that seem to often go unheard by the organizations involved. In all my interviews, I tried to include a variety of opinions and perspectives to ensure balanced ideas and concerns.

One of the biggest limitations of this study was the trouble I had getting in touch with UNESCO itself. Recently, Fumiko Ohinata, the local UNESCO representative in Ethiopia was transferred to Nairobi. This meant that the replacement Nureldin Satti, was not entirely familiar with the project. Mr. Satti also was incredibly hard to contact throughout the study, and although I tried to reach him several times, his office never returned my phone calls. Even research questions that his office requested from me via email were never answered. Despite the lack of cooperation from UNESCO, however, all of the other organizations involved were helpful with my research, and provided me with information about UNESCO in Lalibela.

The Lalibela Churches

At the end of the first millennium in Ethiopia the Axumite Empire began to weaken. Due to a decline in economic strength, resulting in continued dominance of the Red Sea trading routes by the expanding Muslim empire, power shifted away from Axum in the north and to the Zagwe Dynasty in the Lasta region. The Zagwes, however, could not claim the same Solomonic legacy of the previous dynasty, preventing it from claiming religious legitimacy to the throne, something extremely important in Ethiopia at the time. The Zagwes, therefore, in an attempt to gain support from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, became incredibly supportive of the church arts, by both patronizing local artists and constructing new churches.¹ Of the few rulers of the short lived Zagwe Dynasty, King Lalibela (1167-1207) is recognized as the most influential and is credited with the construction of the 11 rock-hewn churches in the area that now bears his name, formerly named Roha. Although King Lalibela is the best known of the Zagwe kings, little is still known about him and the excavation of the churches he inspired. In fact, most of the information about Lalibela is either ecclesiastical in nature or local legend. Similarly, the churches themselves remain the subject of much debate about their origin and influence.

What most architectural experts agree on is that the churches were excavated some 900 years ago. They appear to be a continuation of Axumite architecture, which some architectural experts believe to be related to the Southern Arabian buildings of the first millennium BCE,² although this relationship still remains debated. The churches also demonstrate the integration of Mediterranean architecture, especially Syro-

¹ Shimelis Bensa, lecture, 19 September 2007

² Lepage, Claude. *Lalibela Ethiopia: International Design Competition*. ARCCCH: 2003. Pg 11

Palestinian Christian ideas, with an ornamental influence from Coptic and Arabian art.³ The churches are believed to have been built by King Lalibela to create a 'new' Jerusalem. This 'new' Jerusalem would give Ethiopian Pilgrims a safer alternative to traveling to the actual Jerusalem, a route that had become increasingly hostile due to the Muslim dominance of Egypt and Sudan.⁴ Since the 12th century Lalibela has remained one of the Orthodox Church's most important religious sites. Festivals like *Timkat* (Ephiphany), *Masqal* (The finding of the True Cross), and Christmas, draw thousands of pilgrims to Lalibela every year. In fact, according to the local church administration, over 100,000 pilgrims are expected in Lalibela this year for Christmas, the most ever in recent memory.⁵

The Zagwes, however, were unable to effectively forge national unity. Internal squabbles over the throne wasted important economic resources and energy. In 1270 the Emperor, Ne'akutole'ab, was overthrown by Yukunoamlak who then proclaimed himself emperor. Following the defeat of the Zagwes, and he himself facing resistance from the nobility, Yukunoamlak began to circulate fables about his decent from Menelik I, in turn reestablishing the Solomonic line of Ethiopian rulers;⁶ a line that would last up until the overthrow of Haile Selassie in the 1970's.

The churches since the time of their excavation have been continually protected by the local Lalibela community. According to local community members, large wool carpets, which had been treated with wax or butter, were often stretched over the

³ Ibid pg. 11

⁴ Shimelis Bonsa, lecture, 19 September 2007

⁵ Afe. Gebre Yesus, interview, 21 November, 2007.

⁶ Marcus, Harold G. A History of Ethiopia. University of California Press: Berkley California 2002. pg 13

churches during the rainy season to prevent rain from leaking into the buildings.⁷ This preservation technique was practiced for several centuries until, at the end of the 19th century, large goatskin tents replaced the woolen carpets. These goatskin tents marked the last efforts to prevent further decay of the churches until the mid-1950's.⁸

Restoration Attempts

Due to the weak nature of the volcanic rock from which the churches are cut, rain and sun has caused many of the churches to begin to deteriorate. Over the centuries cracks have begun to form in several of the churches and “sliding of the façade and lateral walls,”⁹ has begun to occur, particularly seen in the church of Beta Aba Libanos. The static nature of the churches has also caused uneven settling over the centuries which has resulted in the shifting of sections of the rock.¹⁰ Salt crystallization and micro vegetation have also begun form and eat away at the soft volcanic tuff that makes up the walls the churches.

In the mid 1950's, the first efforts to protect and restore the churches were carried out in a restoration project which was given to the Italian, Sebastiano Console, by the Ministry of Public Works. Console proceeded to cover many of the churches with tar, painted a reddish color in an attempt to match the color of the natural rock. Along with

⁷ Fasil Giorghis, interview, 3 December 2007

⁸ *Lalibela Ethiopia: International Design Competition*. ARCCCH: 2003. pg 11.

⁹ Slope-Structure Stability Modeling for the Rock Hewn Church of Bet Aba Libanos. pg 213

¹⁰ Angelini, Sandro. *Lalibela- Phase 1*. Italy : International Funds for Monuments, Inc, 1976

the tar, hundreds of corrugated iron sheets were bolted to the roofs of the churches to protect them from further damage from rain and sun.¹¹

A decade later, following a request by the crown prince Merid Asfa Wossen to prof. John Brew, the chairman of UNESCO's committee on Monuments, new attention was paid to the churches of Lalibela. In 1965, the *Committee for the Restoration and Preservation of the Churches of Lalibela*, was founded by Princess Ruth Desta and seven others, among them Dr Sandro Angelini, the director of the Archaeological Museum of Bergamo in Italy.¹² The following year, a new restoration project began, this time paid for by the American based, World Monuments Fund, and under the supervision of Angelini himself. The primary goals of this restoration were to safeguard the churches from further deterioration and to restore "where aesthetically permitted, the monolithic form and character of churches,"¹³ something that had been damaged by the previous restoration attempt. Angelini and his team of five others, from Bergamo, began work on December 19, 1966, finishing three months later in March. The tar from the previous restoration, which prevented the rock from breathing, was removed and neutral cement, mixed with crushed local stone for color, was used to fill in the existing cracks. This cement molded with the original form of the churches but differentiated with the external texture, making it apparent where work had been done.¹⁴ Steel rods were also installed where necessary to help stabilize the shifting rock. The metal roofing was removed from

¹¹ Lindahl, Bernhard. *Local History of Ethiopia*. Nordic Africa Institute Website. Dec 1, 2007.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Angelini, Sandro. *Lalibela- Phase 1*. Italy : International Funds for Monuments, Inc, 1976

¹⁴ Ibid

the roofs and a heavy layer of cement along with, a water repellent solution was added to several of the churches to help protect them from further water damage.¹⁵

In 1989, five of the churches were enclosed in temporary shelters, built by the Ministry of Culture, to protect the churches from the rain which continued to threaten the paintings inside and the rock itself. And in 1995, at the request of the Ethiopian government, UNESCO began work on a new project to protect and conserve the churches. A project identification study was carried out, and preparation for an international design competition was begun.

The Current Project to Protect the Churches

The United Nations, Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), was founded at the conclusion of World War II, by the General Assembly of the United Nations. The impetus behind the organization was to “establish the ‘intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind’ and, in so doing, prevent the outbreak of another world war.”¹⁶ As stated in the organization’s constitution, the purpose of UNESCO was to “contribute to peace and security by prompting collaboration among nations by through education, science and culture,”¹⁷ and in accomplishing this mission the “conservation and protection of the world’s inheritance of books, world of art, and monuments of history and science”¹⁸ would be included. At its founding, on November

¹⁵ Angelini, Sandro. *Lalibela- Phase I*. Italy : International Funds for Monuments, Inc, 1976

¹⁶ *History of UNESCO*. UNESCO website. Nov. 20, 2007

¹⁷ *UNESCO Constitution* . UNESCO website. Nov. 24, 2007

¹⁸ *Ibid*

17, 1945, 37 nations had ratified the constitution, pledging themselves to the conservation of world heritage.¹⁹

In 1972, the General Assembly of the United Nations, at the urging of UNESCO, voted to ratify the World Heritage Convention, subsequently creating the World Heritage Center. In 1978, this organization, charged with the protection of world heritage, created a list of exceptional world heritage sites. Among the first sites on the World Heritage List, fulfilling the first three criteria, were the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela in Ethiopia.²⁰

In 2002, UNESCO along with the International Union of Architects (UIA) held a design competition for new shelters intended to replace the current ones protecting the churches at Lalibela. The idea behind the design was to create shelters which were simple, unobtrusive and easy to assemble and disassemble. According to UNESCO, the shelters had to be easily removed once conservation of the churches had concluded,²¹ meaning that no permanent work could be done to the area. Of the eight European architectural firms to be recognized by the jury, the Italian company Terpin Associati was unanimously chosen for their design which the jury described as an “elegant, unobtrusive and easily comprehensive project.”²² Claudio Baldisserri, the Architectural Designer, writes in his description of the shelters, that “[t]he churches now need some temporary - but not eternal – protection”²³ and these shelters would offer that.

¹⁹ *History of UNESCO*. UNESCO website. Nov. 20, 2007

²⁰ “Rock-hewn Churches of Lalibela.” WHC website: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/18> . Nov 13, 2007

²¹ *Lalibela Ethiopia: International Design Competition*. ARCCH: 2003. pg 11

²² *Ibid* pg 11

²³ *Ibid* pg 11

The original design was simple; large metal columns would use cables to hold up a translucent covering over the churches. This covering would allow light to come through, but protect from sun and rain. The covering would also have lights placed within it, so at night ‘stars’ would appear in the shape of the crosses of Lalibela. After 5 years of logistical delays, construction finally began on these shelters, in February of 2007. Over the last 9 months, however, problems continue to plague the construction of the structures, causing significant delays in the completion of the project.

One of the biggest issues facing the construction of the shelters is the change in design that has occurred. Originally the support columns for the shelter were to be anchored outside the complex of the churches; this was done to limit the visibility of the shelter from inside the site. UNESCO, however, found this original plan too permanent.²⁴ The foundation of the columns would have to be anchored into the rock, requiring excavation. This excavation would leave permanent holes in the ground which would conflict with the temporary nature of the project. Ironically these ‘temporary’ shelters are expected to be in place for the next twenty years, leading to questions about the reality of UNESCO’s original plan. Why would the jury select a design that conflicted with the original idea behind the structures? Also, MH Engineering, the Ethiopian Consultant for the project, estimates that by avoiding excavation, the project saved around 9 million Birr,²⁵ giving the design changes an obvious financial incentive.

The new design, approved by UNESCO and the Ethiopian Center for the Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (CRCCH), who is supervising the construction on behalf of the Ethiopian government, places the support columns in the

²⁴ Ato Jara Haile Mariam, interview, 15 November, 2007.

²⁵ Ato Dawud, interview, 19 November, 2007.

actual church complex. This change in design has sparked immense controversy among local residents, who see the columns as obtrusive to the churches, and a hindrance to the church services that take place everyday. In addition, the original columns, which were to be covered with “sheathing of thin layers of eucalyptus,”²⁶ to help them blend into the local scenery and “create a harmonious relationship between the old and the new”²⁷ are now simply bare metal, conflicting with the church aesthetic. The new design appears much more modern and flashy than the previous one, which was praised for its simplicity. This design also has a dominating appearance in the church compound, detracting from the beauty of the churches they were intended to protect. It appears, with this new design, that shelters which were to remain in the background of the church complex have now become one of the main attractions.

Concerns have also arisen about the stability of the columns themselves, which now are simply resting on the bedrock. Design changes have already had to occur at Beta Ammanuel, because of the risk of high winds,²⁸ and in an area that experiences unpredictable weather, these winds could threaten the stability of the shelters. The previous wooden scaffolding did not pose this much of a threat because of their light weight, causing people to again question the necessity and benefits of the new shelters.²⁹ It seems that the efforts to reduce the impact of the shelters on the area are bringing new threats to the churches.

²⁶ *Lalibela Ethiopia: International Design Competition*. ARCCH: 2003. pg 17.

²⁷ *Ibid* pg 17

²⁸ Russo, Andrea, interview, 19 November, 2007.

²⁹ Afe Memhir Alebatchew Reta, interview, 20 November, 2007.

Design changes have had to also occur at Beta Aba Libanos. Because of large cracks that exist in the church and surrounding bedrock, concerns about the weight of the structures, which rest on the roof of the church, have caused the columns to be moved 9 meters back from the original plan. According to Endeco these changes are expected to reduce the risk to the church, but there is still uncertainty about the cracks expanding under the weight of the shelters.³⁰ Despite these local concerns, UNESCO and the CRCCH have approved this new design and construction has continued in the church complex.

Along with the design changes many community members are concerned with the construction of the shelters themselves. Controversy has arisen over the fact that the contractors put in charge of building the structures are using laborers from outside the Lalibela community. Abebe Mengistu, at the local Tourism office, explains that the scaffolding was removed during the rainy season, exposing the churches to further damage from heavy rains.³¹ Also the wood from the scaffolding is being dissembled in a way that prevents it from furthering use. According to the church and other community members this is a waste of money and valuable resources.³² These are examples of outside workers unaware of the particular situation in Lalibela, and not understanding the local concerns.

These day laborers have also been criticized for the lack of care they exhibit while building the shelters. In fact, recently it was discovered that while removing scaffolding, part of Beta Ammanuel was damaged by the workers. It was not until priests discovered

³⁰ Russo, Andrea, interview, 19 November, 2007.

³¹ Abebe Mengistu, interview, 19 November, 2007

³² Afe. Gebre Yesus, interview, 21 November, 2007.

the broken part of the church was attention brought to the issue.³³ Now a large plastic covering has been draped over the church to protect it from further damage. These types of incidents continue to concern local community members, who feel a close connection to the churches they have grown up with. These people feel that Lalibelan workers would be much more careful in the construction of the project.³⁴ The contractors, however, continue to use laborers from outside the area.

These concerns represent what appears to be one of the largest problem in Lalibela, the continued tension between local community members and outside organizations. Lalibela has become the focus of many cultural heritage organizations including UNESCO, and the CRCCH, but little attention has been paid to the local concerns. The design competition for example, only allowed European companies to submit designs for consideration. The jury of 11 who selected the design had only 5 Ethiopian members,³⁵ none of which were from Lalibela. Lalibelans have had nearly no say in the implementation of the project. This lack of attention given to community has caused many of local people to question the benefits of the project. Afe Memhir Alebatchew Reta, a priest at Lalibela, believes that the shelters' disadvantages outweigh the advantages. He believes that the foreign influence in Lalibela, both from tourism and heritage conservation, is slowly destroying the fragile culture of the area by bringing large amounts of money and attention; something he believes is having a corrupting effect on the impoverished people of the area. This money has caused people to focus more on tourism than on the church. He worries that organizations like UNESCO are

³³ Fasil Giorghis, lecture, 15 October, 2007.

³⁴ Abebe Mengistu, interview, 19 November, 2007

³⁵ *Lalibela Ethiopia: International Design Competition*. ARCCH: 2003. Pg 15.

unaware of these concerns expressed by the local community. Alebatchew believes that Beta Ammanuel and Beta Aba Libanos have already been lost to deterioration and the other churches are being lost to tourism.³⁶

Despite these concerns the local church administration claims that they support the construction of the shelters completely. Afe. Gebre Yesus, the head of the Church in Lalibela, says despite the problems construction has caused, disrupted church services and minor damage to the churches, the shelters will eventually help protect the churches. The preservation of the churches in Lalibela, Gebre Yesus believes, is paramount to the preservation of heritage in the area.³⁷ The Church has even allowed work on Sundays and other holidays to help expedite the construction process, showing their commitment to the project.³⁸

The fact remains, however, that no one is completely satisfied with the construction that is taking place in Lalibela. Among those unhappy with the project, is the funding organization, the European Union. According to Ato Abiy Tessey, at the European Commission, the EU was pressured by UNESCO to approve the new shelter design. He also explains that the CRCCH, the one in charge of the project on behalf of the Ethiopian government, has grossly mismanaged the funds that were allocated for this project, some several million Euro. As a result, the European Union has chosen not to renew the contract for this project at the end of the year, meaning as of January 1st, there will be no more money left for the construction of the shelters. Endeco, the Italian

³⁶ Afe Memhir Alebatchew Reta, interview, 20 November, 2007.

³⁷ Afe. Gebre Yesus, interview, 21 November, 2007.

³⁸ Ibid

contractor, has promised to complete the project, but UNESCO and the CRCCH, will be forced to find funding elsewhere, most likely from the Ethiopian government itself.³⁹

Andrea Russo a representative of Endeco, has complained that there are too many organizations participating in the project.⁴⁰ He explains that to get anything done requires the approval of UNESCO, the CRCCH, the EU, and the church, often taking up to a month, delaying the completion of the shelters even further.⁴¹ According to him, the bureaucracy that accompanies this project has prevented Endeco from efficiently completing the shelters on time, causing even further budget concerns. These delays have also created concerns among the church and community, who expected the project to be completed by Christmas. In reality, only the shelters at Beta Mariam and Beta Ammanuel are expected to be completed by Christmas. The rest of the project is expected to be completed closer to March.⁴²

Lalibela exemplifies the problems that arise when large bureaucratic organizations like the United Nations try to solve community specific problems. The nature of UNESCO requires them to work with both funding sources like the EU, and local administrations like the CRCCH. The effect of having this many groups involved in projects like the one in Lalibela, is there being no room for local input and ideas, which is important in a community that feels such a close connection to the churches. Too many organizations think that they own Lalibela. UNESCO classifies it as a world heritage site, making it their responsibility to protect it. Unfortunately, UNESCO's idea on how to preserve this site has continually changed because of its own experts

³⁹ Interview, Ato Abiy Tessey, 3 December 2007.

⁴⁰ Russo, Andrea, interview, 19 November, 2007.

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Fikru Giorgis, interview, 20 November, 2007

disagreeing on the nature of preservation. The CRCCH, believes that Ethiopia owns the churches, and must therefore have a say in their preservation. And the Church, who actually own the churches, feels like it is being left out of the decision making process.⁴³ The resulting effect of this political atmosphere in Lalibela is the alienation of many local community members from a project intended to help preserve their heritage.⁴⁴

The Disappearance of Church Traditions

Tourism has come to Lalibela extremely quickly. Not more than 15 years ago, a new airport was constructed and paved roads were built to the town.⁴⁵ According to the local Ministry of Tourism, over 20,000 people will come to Lalibela in 2008, on average spending two nights and over \$3,000.⁴⁶ With tourism comes money and investment. Currently 12 hotels exist in Lalibela and 10 more are being constructed in the town; over 38,000,000 Birr is being invested in the tourism industry this year.⁴⁷ This money has given the town enough funds to build new infrastructure including several primary schools, a secondary school and a vocational college. Tourism has brought economic life to an area that, due to environmental changes, was slowly dieing.

With tourism, however, has come new problems that threaten the centuries old church traditions that have been apart of Lalibela since the excavation of the churches. These traditions, which are passed from priest to priest in church schools, are slowly being lost with the aging clergy. Among these traditions is the reading and reciting of

⁴³Afe. Gebre Yesus, interview, 21 November, 2007.

⁴⁴Fikru Giorgis, interview, 20 November, 2007

⁴⁵Abebe Mengistu, interview, 19 November, 2007

⁴⁶Ibid

⁴⁷Lalibela Municipality Financial Records

prayer, as well as traditional forms of painting and scribing. One of the biggest problems according to the church in Lalibela, is the lack of interest in church education expressed by the youth of the area.⁴⁸ Because tourism has brought modern schools most of the youth in the area have chosen to attend the public school system instead of learning in the church. Those who do attend church schools only learn for a few years, not nearly long enough to master the traditional church language, Ge'ez, which most of the hymns and prayers are written in.⁴⁹ This training takes a minimum of 8 years, according to local priests. The children are instead attracted to other fields that have the potential to offer more money. Of these fields, it is tourism that has attracted much of the youth. As a guide, a person could make several hundred Birr a day, much more than any church position offers. It is because so many children are going in this direction that very few youth are joining the churches and learning church traditions.⁵⁰

Along with concerns about low youth membership to the Church, are concerns about the piety of the priests already present. Because tourism brings a substantial amount of money to the Church in Lalibela, it can finally afford to pay its priests and deacons a salary. For the first time in the Church's history, one can support himself entirely as a priest. Previously priests and deacons had to rely on traditional means of income, like farming, to support themselves.⁵¹ This made joining the Church more about faith, than money. The implementation of a salary, also explains the doubling of church staff over the past several decades.⁵² Afe Memhir Alebatchew Reta, who has been a

⁴⁸ Afe. Gebre Yesus, interview, 21 November, 2007.

⁴⁹ Afe Memhir Alebatchew Reta, interview, 20 November, 2007.

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Afe Memhir Alebatchew Reta, interview, 20 November, 2007.

priest for 51 years, believes that because of this phenomenon the sacred traditions of the church are in critical danger of being lost. The priests joining the church are not putting in the effort to learn these traditions.⁵³ According to the Church administration, of the 500 priests and deacons in Lalibela, only about half are educated in church traditions and only about 50 have a firm understanding of the intangible heritage of the Lalibela churches.⁵⁴ And despite efforts by the church to record some of these traditions, much of Lalibela's religious heritage will be lost within the next couple of decades as knowledgeable priest pass away.

Many others complain about the modernizing effect tourism is having on the churches themselves. According to Tegegne Yirdaw, a local artist who has lived in Lalibela his whole life, the churches have changed over the last ten years. New fluorescent lights have been installed to illuminate the often dark churches. There has even been a proposal to start allowing night tours of the churches, made possible by high powered lights being installed into the columns of the shelters.⁵⁵ Tegegne and other community members explain that this modernization has taken away from the connection they feel to the churches they grew up in.⁵⁶ Although tourism provides many of them with a livelihood, they are also aware of the negative effects it has had on the area. It appears to many of these people that if something is not done to encourage and preserve the traditions and culture of the Church much of the intangible heritage of the area will be lost forever.

⁵³ Afe Memhir Alebatchew Reta, interview, 20 Novmember, 2007.

⁵⁴ Afe. Gebre Yesus, interview, 21 November, 2007.

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Tegegne Yirdaw, 21, November, 2007.

Saving Lalibela's Intangible Heritage

When Jacques Dubois first came to Ethiopia with the French Civil Service in 1966, tourism in the country was just beginning to be developed. When he was asked to design the Roha hotel in Lalibela it was only the second hotel to be built in the extremely isolated community. His inspiration for the inside of the hotel was simple, he wanted everything to be made in Lalibela; he wanted the art to be as authentic as possible.⁵⁷ Thirty years after designing the hotel, Dubois used this same idea as the inspiration behind a new project intended to save Lalibela's intangible heritage.

In 2004, Dubois and a few others, using funds from UNESCO, held the first Artist Workshop in Lalibela. The aim of this workshop was to find craftspeople from around the area of Lalibela with some artistic experience, and develop these arts into a self sustaining skill. The strategy was to “help artists do what they need to have done but cannot do for themselves” and that was “immediately feasible to meet the urgency of the situation.”⁵⁸ The idea was to turn traditional artistic knowledge that many community members possessed and give them the training and materials to allow these people to sell their crafts to the growing tourism market. According to the proposal and assessment Dubois submitted to UNESCO in 2004, following the initial workshop, only about 25% of tourists buy souvenirs while in Lalibela and the average price spent on each item is only 25 Birr.⁵⁹ When asked about the low amount of souvenir sales many tourists cite

⁵⁷ Dubois, Jacques. Interview, 14 November 2007

⁵⁸ Dubois, Jacques. Artisanal Crafts Development: Assessment Mission Report and Preliminary Project, Proposal. 2004. pg B3.

⁵⁹ Dubois, Jacques. Artisanal Crafts Development: Assessment Mission Report and Preliminary Project, Proposal. 2004. pg B2.

the lack of authentic goods, things made locally in Lalibela. This project was therefore intended to create both an income for local artists and authentic crafts for the thousands of tourists that visit Lalibela every year. In encouraging the development of these crafts this project also ensured the preservation of the “cultural identity of the various groups by adapting and promoting their traditional crafts to modern requirements while retaining the essential indigenous characteristics inherent in them.”⁶⁰

The first workshop consisted of 40 local artists, selected by the local Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The age of those selected ranged from 17 to 50, and among the group were several prisoners from the Lalibela prison. Also, due to the social constraints of craftspeople in the area, many of those who attended the workshop were married; it being typical for weavers and potters to be wed.⁶¹ In the three week long workshop the craftspeople were taught by a group of experts knowledgeable in the production of crafts and the selling of these crafts to tourists. New techniques and inspiration allowed, at the end of the workshop, for the production of a variety of high quality prototypes to be used as examples for future production.⁶² These prototypes can be found in the project’s gallery. Following the workshop an association was established in which the artists could work as a cooperative to further support their craftsmanship.

The intended benefits of the project are twofold. The first obvious benefit of the workshop and establishment of the association is the income that the sale of these crafts generates. According to the rules of the association of artists, upon the sale of an item the

⁶⁰ Dubois, Jacques. Artisanal Crafts Development: Assessment Mission Report and Preliminary Project, Proposal. 2004. pg A-5

⁶¹ Ato. Getaye, interview, 17 Novmeber, 2007

⁶² Dubois, Jacques. Artisanal Crafts Development: Assessment Mission Report and Preliminary Project, Proposal. 2004. pg 14.

artist pays for materials used and gives 10% of the sale back to the association. The remaining money is kept by the artist.⁶³ Because many of the artists rely on the revenue from farming, this added income helps support families that often range from four to nine people.⁶⁴ This project has therefore helped in the development of the economic sustainability of local community members; something that is badly needed in an area, which according to a recent study, suffers from a 33% unemployment rate.⁶⁵ UNESCO, according to those working closely with the organization, is very aware of the poverty that plagues Lalibela, and in the last five years it has become their goal to help promote projects that will help with the economic growth of an area.⁶⁶ With the concern of money partiality alleviated, the crafts people in the association are allowed to concentrate on the development of the crafts themselves. This means that as the artists continue to work, the quality and variety of themes is expected to increase in their art.

Along with the economic benefits of this project are the implications it has for the heritage preservation of the community. By turning the artistic knowledge of the community into a marketable skill, this UNESCO project has made these skills practical to those who possess them. Many of these skills were threatened by the introduction of foreign technology and materials. Plastic water jugs have replaced clay ones; cloth made in foreign countries is being used instead of local weaving. Even traditional church paintings were threatened by the cheaper prints from China. This project has helped the traditional crafts of Lalibela compete economically with foreign goods because of the

⁶³ Ato. Getaye, interview, 17 November, 2007

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Boukhari, Sophie. "Lalibela' fragile churches- Ethiopia's medieval churches." *UNESCO Courier*. July-August 1998.

⁶⁶ Dubois, Jacques. Interview, 14 November 2007

money they generate from tourism, in turn protecting them from being forgotten and lost.⁶⁷

The church traditions threatened to be lost have also been revived and protected by this project. Skills like parchment making and calligraphy have been incorporated into the workshop training. Traditionally, scribes would spend years copying ecclesiastical documents only to donate them to the church. The only income this work generates is barely enough to sustain the scribe.⁶⁸ This UNESCO project has made these skills profitable. Many members of the association use these church traditions to create art that can be sold to tourists. And because much of the inspiration for this art comes from the churches themselves, sacred paintings and manuscripts are being replicated and recorded, helping preserve the church heritage of Lalibela. Haile Mariam Tadesse, a local traditional painter, believes that this project has greatly encouraged the youth to learn traditional painting techniques.⁶⁹ Because tourists are interested in authentic traditional church paintings, children are beginning to see the financial benefits of learning these skills. Haile himself is teaching several children in both the manufacturing of paints locally and traditional painting techniques. When asked about the commercialization of these skills, he explains tourism sales are necessary to keep the skills alive and the youth interested, and with more children learning, the intangible church heritage is preserved.

Unfortunately there is a lack of reference support from the Ethiopian Church. The Church, in attempt to save much of its artistic heritage, keeps the majority of its art

⁶⁷ Dubois, Jacques. Interview, 14 November 2007

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Haile Mariam Tadesse, interview, 21 November, 2007

hidden in churches and monasteries, in turn denying not only the painters, but potters, calligraphers, and weavers access to potential designs they could use for their crafts. This project has proven the “necessity for the artisans to have permanent access to the many forms of their cultural heritage.”⁷⁰ The Church has also been critical of the UNESCO project for not including the church directly. They believe that UNESCO money should be given directly to the Church administration, to be used as they see fit, not to outside NGO’s.⁷¹ Because of this attitude, the Church has not been very supportive of the project, preventing its success in a community that remains deeply religious. It has become clear with both UNESCO projects in Lalibela, that the Church’s support is critical for preservation to be truly successful.

Regardless of the Church’s stance towards this project, it remains an effective strategy on how to preserve the intangible heritage of a community. Tourism has come to the area, and appears to be growing, 33% in the last five years.⁷² What this project has done, and UNESCO has succeeded in doing, is using tourism as a tool to preserve the intangible heritage of the area. By working on a small scale level, the organization has effectively addressed issues of poverty and heritage protection, and in doing so has proven its effectiveness when working on the local level. So effective, that the local Ministry of Culture wants to take control of the project; something that the project organizers believe to be a good sign. If the local government wants to be involved, Mr. Dubois explains, it means they see the potential of the project.⁷³

⁷⁰ Dubois, Jacques. Training Workshop report to the UNESCO Office Addis Ababa- Feb. 2005. 2005. pg 1

⁷¹ Dubois, Jacques. Interview, 14 November 2007

⁷² Abebe Mengistu, interview, 19 November, 2007

⁷³ Dubois, Jacques. Interview, 14 November 2007

This project in Lalibela demonstrates the new mission UNESCO has undertaken in the last several years, to protect the intangible heritage of the world. UNESCO writes on its website, “Having at one time referred exclusively to the monumental remains of cultures, heritage as a concept has gradually come to include new categories such as the intangible, ethnographic or industrial heritage. A noteworthy effort was subsequently made to extend the conceptualization and description of the intangible heritage.”⁷⁴ In 2003, the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage met in Paris to: “safeguard the intangible cultural heritage, to raise awareness at the local, national and international levels of the importance of the intangible cultural heritage,” and “to provide for international cooperation and assistance.”⁷⁵ This project in Lalibela shows UNESCO’s commitment to Intangible Cultural Heritage, which it believes to be endangered due to effects of globalization, uniformization policies and lack of appreciation.⁷⁶ According to article 14 of the convention, UNESCO will help “ensure recognition of, respect for, and enhancement of the intangible cultural heritage in society, in particular through: educational, awareness-raising and information programmes, aimed at the general public, in particular young people.”⁷⁷ The Artisanal Crafts Development Project, in Lalibela, with this help from UNESCO has accomplished this exact task. It has recognized and enhanced intangible heritage through education, guaranteeing the survival of much of Lalibela traditional knowledge. This demonstrates UNESCO’s effectiveness when working on the local level, with individuals rather than organizations.

⁷⁴ Cultural Heritage. UNESCO website. Nov. 30, 2007

⁷⁵ *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*. UNESCO website. Nov. 30, 2007.

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Ibid

Analysis

UNESCO's success in Lalibela has had mixed results. Efforts to protect and conserve the actual churches themselves have drawn immense criticism by the local community and foreign observers alike. The project is three months behind schedule. This means that completion will not be done by Christmas, when the contract and funding end, requiring UNESCO and the CRCCH to seek funding from other sources, something that might be difficult for a project that is already over budget.⁷⁸ The design has also changed, making the project much more intrusive than originally expected. Because of all these factors, it can be assumed that this preservation effort has not been entirely successful. The problems that have developed, however, in the construction of the shelters have to do with both the nature of the project and the approach the organizations involved have taken.

A project like this one can not be done on the small scale. The logistics and funding necessary required UNESCO to turn to other organizations for assistance. The European Union is involved because it is funding the project. The CRCCH is involved because they are the state representatives in Lalibela. Having this many organizations creates a bureaucratic system that prevents efficiency. This lack of efficiency creates tension between the parties involved. In Lalibela, the delays that have occurred as a result of this have caused members of the community to become skeptical of the project, and support for the shelters to decline.⁷⁹ Also because foreign companies are behind the construction certain local needs are not being recognized. Among these needs, is use of the churches, which is being hindered by scaffolding and construction, and a guarantee

⁷⁸ Ato. Jara Haile Mariam, interview, 15 November, 2007

⁷⁹ Fikru Giorgis, interview, 20 November, 2007

that the churches will be protected during construction. Instead, Endeco has expressed frustration toward the church for delaying the project even further,⁸⁰ and incidents have occurred that have damaged the church. More attention must be given local these local concerns if a project like this is to be successful. The nature of a project like this requires UNESCO to create a better relationship with the community.

UNESCO has, however, done a much better job in protecting the intangible heritage of Lalibela. The Artisanal Crafts Development Project, started by Mr. Dubois, exemplifies the success a large organization, like UNESCO, can have by working directly with the community. The program not only creates an economic basis for impoverished members of the community, but in doing so helps preserve the cultural heritage of the area. It does this using a budget of only \$15,000 dollars. A sum that is dwarfed by the 9 million Euro budget allotted for the preservation and conservation of the churches, one million of which was allocated just for the competition and publicity for the project.⁸¹ UNESCO is spending money on large scale conservation projects, which is taking up most of the organization's budget; not enough money is going to smaller projects in specific areas. The Artisanal Crafts Development Project proves that heritage preservation can be done at a minimal cost, with extensive benefits. And as stated before, it is not only crafts that are being preserved, but also scared church knowledge and traditions that are in danger of being lost. Even though the long term success of the project is to be determined, the example it creates can easily be replicated in other parts of Ethiopia and the world.

⁸⁰ Russo, Andrea, interview, 19 November, 2007.

⁸¹ *Lalibela Ethiopia: International Design Competition*. ARCCH: 2003.

Lalibela exemplifies the complexity of heritage protection. Unlike many other monuments UNESCO has tried to protect, Lalibela remains a living heritage site. The community, as well as much of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, is still very much involved with the churches and uses them as a spiritual site. Because of this fact, simple restoration is not sufficient in preserving the heritage of the area. UNESCO has to take into account the people living around and using the church. Lalibela is important to the people that live there; they feel a sense of ownership of the churches. It is therefore important to include them in the heritage preservation process.

Conclusion

The case in Lalibela epitomizes a problem that many international organizations face. It is extremely hard for a foreign organization to fully understand the problems that affect a specific area. Every culture has specific concerns that need to be understood before action is taken. In Lalibela, these concerns seem to stem from the community's sense of ownership of the churches. Because of this sense of ownership, it is important to involve the community in the heritage protection efforts. This could mean allowing for transparency in the project, giving them the ability to supervise and have a say in the construction process, and making the contractors accountable for their actions. It would also mean using local labor in the project, helping both guarantee the safety of the churches while also providing jobs to the local community. Training in conservation should also be given to the local community. By training a group of people in Lalibela in conservation, UNESCO would both create jobs and have permanent conservation efforts taking place at the churches, possibly preventing another project like this one from taking

place. By involving the community, and understanding their specific concerns, UNESCO would alleviate the tension some members of the community feel towards these projects.

The situation in Lalibela is far from over. Construction is not due to be completed for another several months and conservation has yet to begin. This means the long term success of UNESCO's efforts to preserve the tangible heritage of the area are still to be determined. In twenty years when the shelters are scheduled to be disassembled, new questions about the future of the churches will present themselves. Further research needs to be carried out to find a permanent solution for protecting the churches. Further research should also be done into the success of community based projects, like Jacques Dubois'. If this project is successful it can be used by UNESCO in other areas of the world.

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Appendices

Interview:

Afe Memhir Alebatchew Reta: Priest in Ethiopian Orthodox Church

11/20/07

Location: His home in Lalibela

Lalibela is an extremely religious community, it was therefore very important for me to talk to someone in the church about the state of Lalibela's culture. This included both the shelters themselves that are being constructed and the intangible heritage of the area, specifically the church. Alebatchew came highly recommended by several people for his expertise of these issues, so I decided to interview him specifically about the disappearance of church traditions. He would know about these issues and because of his age and not being directly affiliated with the church administration, I hoped he would be honest.

The first thing I wanted to establish was why he joined the church. Because youth attendance to religious schools in Lalibela is low, I wanted to know why he chose to be a priest when he was young. His answer surprised me; he said that he became a priest because of the lack of alternatives. What surprised me about this answer was that I expected him to say he had always wanted to be a priest. He became a priest because of lack of alternatives, and he criticized children now for not becoming priests because they have alternatives. I pushed this issue further; into the effects tourism and money have had on Lalibela. Alebatchew was very honest in his opinion, that tourism was destroying Lalibelan culture.

This interview provided me with the information I needed to further explore the issue of tourism and its effect on the church. Originally, this was not going to be a large

part of my paper, but after talking with Alebatchew, I realized that this was one of the definitive issues in Lalibela. It tied into the topic of heritage protection and the community's opinion of foreign involvement in Lalibela. Of all my interviews I liked this one the best because I felt like it was the most honest. Alebatchew did not try to hide his feelings about tourism, and this honesty allowed me to see the other side of this issue.

Field notes:

The change in design of the shelters in Lalibela:

It seems of all the problems that have occurred over the shelters in Lalibela, it is the change in design that has sparked the most controversy. The original design that UNESCO approved was praised for its simplicity. The design allowed for the churches to be covered while remaining in the background of the complex. This was what was so appealing about this design, but this design changed.

The new design is completely contradictory to the original idea behind the structures. The shelters were supposed to be unobtrusive to the church complex, but now are placed inside next to the churches themselves. Why was this design approved by UNESCO? They apparently thought that the original design was too permanent, but they approved this design in 2002. Also these structures are going to remain in place for over 20 years, making them relatively permanent already. Why did it take five years for the organization to realize the flaws in the original design and change it to something completely different?

It seems like no one really likes this new design and many of the groups involved feel like they were pressured by UNESCO to approve it. It also appears that there were financial incentives to changing the design, but I do not think that that was part of the

rationale. Although, I am sure the contractor did not mind saving 9 million Birr, by not excavating. What does the community think about this change? And are they aware of it, and who is responsible for it?

Observation

Construction of the shelters:

On my second trip to Lalibela I surveyed the progress they were making on the construction. The shelters at Mariam and Ammanuel seemed to be almost done. The roofs of the structures were almost complete and the scaffolding was completely surrounding the churches. The structures at Medane Alem and Ata Libanos, however, were not even begun to be built. The cement for the columns at Medane Alem was just then being poured. The scaffolding for Medane Alem was not even completely up and there was no scaffolding at Libanos. Work for the project seemed to be going at a very slow rate.

This raised certain questions while I was in Lalibela, most important being: how will this ever be completed on time? We were in Lalibela one month prior to this trip and construction had begun on Mariam and Ammanuel, but now the shelters for these churches were just barely nearing completion. This means it takes close to two months to finish these structures. Medane Alem is the largest of the churches by far, and construction is just now beginning. This means that the shelter will not be done until at least February, way after Christmas. These shelters seem to be extremely behind schedule.

These delays seem to upset the local community. Talking to both church members and community members, it seems that everyone was hoping for the shelters to be done by Christmas, when thousands of pilgrims come to Lalibela. Delays on this project have caused support from the community to wane and I wanted to find out why. Why have these delays occurred and when will construction actually be completed? Whose fault is it?