

---

## AlmaTourism

Journal of Tourism, Culture and Territorial Development

---

### Heritage Interpretation and Presentation Practices in Tigray, Northern Ethiopia: Cases from the Wukro Tourism Cluster

Asfaw, G. W.\*

Gebreslassie, D. G.†

Mekelle University (Ethiopia)

---

#### ABSTRACT

Interpretation and presentation of heritage is becoming a major challenge as important elements of human culture are misinterpreted and vanishing throughout the globe. It is only when the heritages are sustainably interpreted that tourism can be developed in a sustainable manner. The major purpose of this study is to investigate the practices of heritage interpretation and presentation in Tigray with a case from Wukro Tourism Cluster. Descriptive type of research design inculcating both quantitative and qualitative research methods was employed for empirical investigation. Questionnaire, interview and observation were the main instruments of primary data collections. Primary data was collected from 134 respondents (120 questionnaires and 14 interviews). Findings of the study reveal that the practices of heritage interpretation and presentation in Wukro Cluster are embedded with different pitfalls. A lot of unfavorable factors like limited capacity of heritage interpreters, scant attention to community based heritage interpretation, problems in variety and quality of visitor experiences, problems with stakeholder cooperation, lack of organized interpretation and presentation, problems in the adequacy and quality of interpretation infrastructures and others. Developing appropriate interpretation system, preparing different interpretation and presentation infrastructures and introducing common practices of visitor management can be good remedies.

---

**Keywords:** Heritage; Interpretation; Practice; Presentation; Visitor Management

---

\* E-mail address: [geretour2009@yahoo.com](mailto:geretour2009@yahoo.com)

† E-mail address: [dejeng2007@gmail.com](mailto:dejeng2007@gmail.com)

## **1. Introduction**

### *1.1 Background of the Study*

Tourism is a growing industry and is predicted that the sector will further grow to 1.6 billion tourists by 2020 (WTO, 2008). Heritage tourism as part of the tourism industry is also the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry in the world. However, at a time of increasing globalization, the sustainable management of the complex reality of heritage from interpretation and presentation and cultural diversity of any particular place is a major challenge for present and future generations. Proper management and interpretation are keystones for the success of conservation and heritage management in general (Getty Trust, 1999; Mohamed, 2010; European Association for Heritage Interpretation, 2011).

Interpretation is the intermediary between the object and the observer; it tries to forward a message or messages, but has no absolute control over the ways in which these are received. Identical events can be presented or interpreted in radically different ways. Good heritage management with a major focus on heritage interpretation and presentation ensures that one complements the other (ICOMOS, 2008).

Interpretive messages must be interesting to capture attention, meaningful so that people care, and compelling so that people no longer think or act the same after hearing them. A successful interpretation and presentation is a balancing of juggling act, a graceful and smooth ballet of interaction between interpretive presentation and the mind of the listener. Sustainable development of a heritage site includes several fields such as interpretation and presentation of the site, knowledge of visitor profiles, conservation, protection and partnership between the different stakeholders involved in the management. The interpretation of that heritage, within a framework of internationally recognized and appropriately applied standards, is usually the responsibility of all the stakeholders. Fontaine (2005) stated that heritage management needs to establish strategic planning whose central issue is a long-term plan view that looks at partnership, sustainable development, interpretation, and conservation and visitor management. Interpretation and presentation can help to avoid the danger of commoditization through creating interest, understanding and curiosity.

### *1.2 Statement of the Problem*

Heritage by its nature is unique, fragile and irreplaceable and requires sensitive use and management to make it the basis of tourism enterprises in a sustainable way. So, it is imperative to understand how to interpret and present these sites sustainably while protecting and conserving them for the long term (Australia's Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Center, 2008). Heritage sites and visitor experiences can be preserved and improved by effective interpretation and presentation that monitors the flow of visitors, provides clear directions for safe behavior, and provides direct and

indirect information that fosters visitors' appreciation and conservation of the monuments. The professional competency of the interpreters affects the quality of interpretation and thus affects visitors' experiences consequently; it influences their desire to revisit the sites in the future (ICOMOS, 2008).

Ethiopia has huge tourism potential due to the presence of the diversity of natural, cultural and historical tourist attractions distributed throughout the country. It possesses the highest number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the continent. Ethiopia has also a lot to bring to such international level of significance if conservation, interpretation, promotion and management of the heritages are strengthened (Chernet, 2008). According to World Bank (2006), much of the heritages of Ethiopia are being eroded by rapid development and urban growth. Accessibility to historical heritage sites, conservation, interpretations and presentation at historical heritage sites, visitor information and quality of guides are among the problems which need attention. Only negligible progress is made in Ethiopia as far as uncovering, interpreting and promoting the country's heritage in sustainable manner (Worku, 2010).

Coles and Mitchell (2009) identified that the interpretation and management of heritages in Ethiopia is much less successful and the state of public-private sector coordination is still poor. The level of interpretation of history and cultural heritage is very poor in Ethiopia. Particularly, guides are singled out as being poorly trained. Poor quality information and interpretation of heritage products is among the prevailing problems stated by visitors in Ethiopia (World Bank, 2006). The negative image of Ethiopia is persistent; it renders the country less attractive as a tourist destination. There is an urgent need to develop and project a competitive and unique country image through a research-based marketing and branding strategy, requiring close collaboration with the private sector and the broader cultural sector (Amare, 2012).

As part of Ethiopia, Tigray is endowed with heritage and such heritage is exposed to the above mentioned threats. With all the potential and unique attractions to the region Tigray, the country and to the general world with their universal values, the growth of tourism sector in the region, the contribution to the socio-economic activities of local community surrounding is still negligible or insignificant because of various bottlenecks. The sustainability issue of the heritages is at question mark because of different problems. The region is still poorly promoted and developed because of different hindering factors like limited infrastructure, unplanned growth in urban areas, poor management of tourist attraction sites, poor coordination and poor interpretation and marketing of heritages (Cannon, 2009).

Irrespective of these drawbacks, continuous increment in number of visitors and infrastructural development is going on in Tigray which makes access easier for visitors and other development activities. This is both a necessary step and at the same time it can have a negative consequence on the heritage. On one hand, increment in tourists flow brings more income and, on the other hand, uncontrolled tourism development may aggravate the deterioration of the heritage's values. It is only when the heritage is sustainably managed, interpreted and presented that tourism can be developed in a sustainable manner and in-turn contribute for sustainable development.

In Tigray, studies conducted to evaluate interpretive and presentation services such as interpreters, brochures, signs, interpretive media, heritage interpreters' competencies

in detail are scant.

Hence, based on these assessment gaps and the continual increment of visitors; it is a crucial step to assess the interpretation and presentation of heritage in Tigray focusing on the Wukro tourism cluster and disclose the prevailing problems for priority remedies which can pave the way to sustainable heritage interpretation, presentation and tourism development. So, in this study the research team assessed the practices of heritage interpretation and presentation in the Wukro tourism cluster of Tigray, which is a rapidly growing cluster with a special focus on the challenges of heritage interpretation, sustainability of interpretation practices, professional competencies of heritage interpreters and the contributions of interpretation and presentation on tourists' satisfaction at tourist destinations and for the sustainability of the heritages and tourism.

### *1.3 Objectives of the Study*

#### General Objective

The overall objective of the study is to assess the practices of heritage interpretation and presentation in Tigray region focusing on the Wukro Tourism Cluster.

#### Specific Objectives

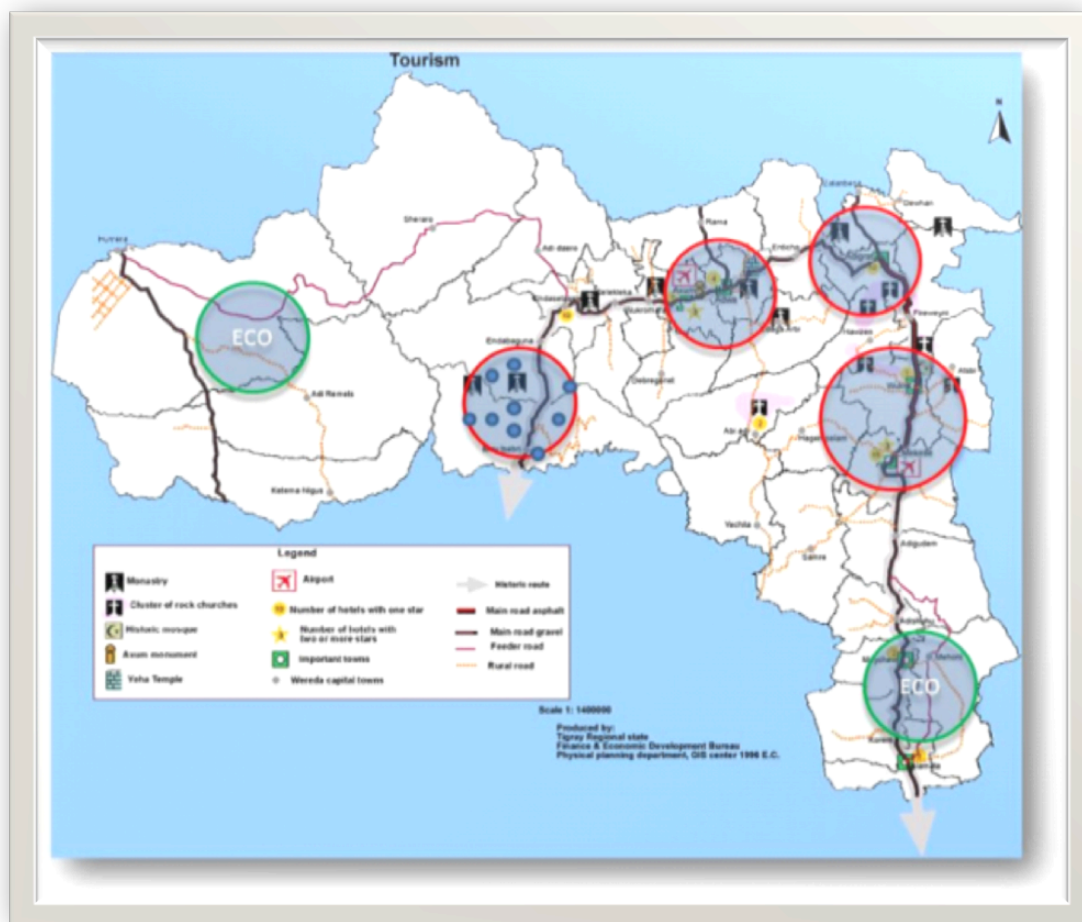
1. To assess the prevailing challenges of heritage interpretation and presentation practices.
2. To assess the adequacy of interpretation and presentation infrastructures in the study area.
3. To identify the existing and needed competencies for heritage interpreters in the study area.
4. To examine the contribution of sustainable heritage interpretation and presentation practices on sustaining tourists' satisfaction and heritage significances.
5. To indicate empirical intervening solutions for the identified challenges.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### *2.1 Description of the Study Area*

Tigray is the northernmost of Ethiopia's federal states located at 12°12' - 14°32'N latitude and 36°30' - 40°30'E longitude. Excluding Mekelle city, the state capital, there are six administrative zones: comprising a total of 47 weredas (districts) and 673 tabias (sub-districts). As per to the central statistics authority (2007), the total land size of the region is 54,572.61 km<sup>2</sup>, and accounts for about 11% of the country. Tigray has a total population of 6.2 million which is about 8% of the total population of Ethiopia, (49.2% male and 50.8 female), 85% of which live in the rural areas. Tigrigna is the official working language of the region. Sahonga and Kunaminga are also spoken by the respective communities.

The Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau grouped all the historical, archaeological and natural heritages of Tigray into six Tourism Clusters. These are: Axum, Michew, Humera, Mekelle, Wukro and Gheralta clusters. So, this study is conducted only on the Wukro Tourism Cluster which is rapidly emerging tourism cluster located in the Eastern Zone of Tigray.



**Figure 1:** Tourism Clusters of Tigray

Source: Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau, 2015

Wukro Tourism Cluster is endowed with different historical, archaeological, cultural and natural heritages. But the cluster is predominantly well known for the collection of Rock-Hewn Churches. The following are some of the heritage endowments of the cluster.

#### *Wukro Cherkos Rock-hewn Church*

The northern edge of Wukro town holds a rock-hewn church called Wukro Cherkos is a semi-monolithic church whose side walls, front wall and roof are completely separated and projecting from the Main rock. It is attached to the rock only on its floor and at its back wall. The church is believed to have been carved during the fourth century. Internal architecture and art works, rectangular carved columns of

quartz – rich sandstone, supporting arches and curved ceilings decorated by similar designs characterise this church. The presence of a sand stone slab with inscriptions of the Aksumite type in the vicinity of the church may also support the claim that the church dates back to Aksumite period.



**Figure 2:** The Exterior of Wukro Cherkos church

Source: Photograph by Asfaw and Gebreslassie, 2016

#### *Mekabir Ga'ewa Archaeological Site at Adi Akaweh*

Located in the southwestern outskirts of the town of Wukro, Adi Akawh is a recently discovered archaeological site. The discovery of the site has created much excitement and interest among archaeologists. German and Ethiopian archaeologists have discovered a number of objects, including a statue of a seated woman and an altar with a Sabaeen inscription on it as well as a partially inscribed podium. To the surprise of archaeologists, the inscription mentions the pre-Aksumite Da'amat kingdom and the temple of Yeha. From the evidence assembled, the site is tentatively dated to the 8<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century before the birth of Christ.





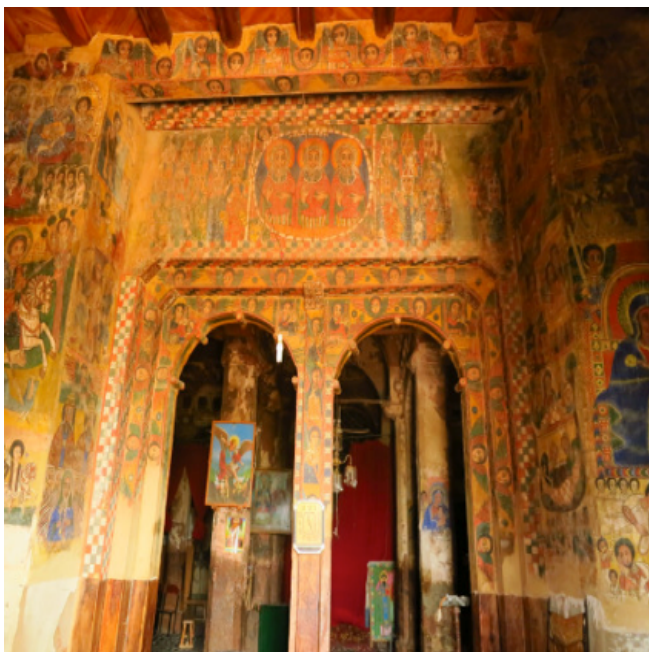
**Figures 3-4:** A statue of seated woman and an Altar with Sabean inscription

Source: Photograph by Asfaw and Gebreslassie, 2016

#### *The Church of Abraha We-Atsbeha*

About 15km drive west from Wukro; Abraha We-Atsbeha is located in one of the most scenic sites of the region. Considered among the country's earliest churches, it is known for extraordinary interior decoration as well as its magnificent murals. Its ceiling is decorated with sophisticated patterns and its walls are dotted by curved crosses. More than a dozen of enormous columns divide the interior of the church into several bays and aisles. Without doubt, Abraha we Atsbeha is a rock church masterpiece. According to local tradition, the church was constructed in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, but some scholars estimated its date of construction to be the 10<sup>th</sup> century. What is certain is it is built well before the famous rock-hewn churches at Lalibela, where the level of sophisticated rock architecture reached its peak.





**Figures 5-6:** Details of Abraha We-Atsbeha church  
Source: Photograph by Asfaw and Gebreslassie, 2016

### *Negash Mosque*

Tigray, the cradle of Ethiopian Christendom, also contributed for the growth and transformation of Islam, the other great religion of the world. One of the least known histories in Ethiopia is the contribution Tigray has made to the protection of Islam in the early stage of its development. As per historical documents, after escaping persecution from the mercantile rulers of Mecca, the first group of Prophet Mohammed's followers had sought refuge in Ethiopia, described by the prophet, as a kingdom of a "righteous king" where "no-one is wronged". It was at Negash, 60 km north of Mekelle – the state's capital – that most of the prophet's co-religionists had stayed and eventually buried. Negash is considered as the Islamic world's second holiest city, only preceded by Mekkah. As a result, the Prophet exempted Ethiopia from Jihad, the Islamic Holy war.





**Figure 7:** Tomb of Seid Ahmed Al Nejashi  
Source: Photograph by Asfaw and Gebreslassie, 2015

### *Mikael Milhaizenghi*

The most striking feature of this church is to be found in the recessed ceiling just after entering the left hand door way. Aksumite friezes approximately half a meter in height, decorate three sides of the recess. Forming the dome of the recess is a beautiful, circular, shallow relief carved from the sandstone rock. Many bands of intricate circular patterns radiate out from an enclosed Greek cross at the center of the relief, the whole design resembling the decorated Tigrian circular bread loaf, the *Himbasha*.



**Figure 8:** A beautiful, circular, shallow relief carved dome from the sandstone rock  
Source: Photograph by Asfaw and Gebreslassie, 2016

### *Debre Gerizan Mariam Gundagundo Church*

It lies impressively between a sheer cliff to the west and an escarpment a common geographical feature in Ethiopia, which drops down toward the Danakil depression to the east. The monastery hosts a church that bears its name, Mariam Gunda Gundo, dedicated to St Mary. The old church is well noted for its ancient parchments made of goatskin with colorful illustrations, wood or metal traditional Ethiopian crosses, and

kingly crowns. Its annual festival occurs every year on January 29<sup>th</sup> (30<sup>th</sup> during Gregorian leap year).



**Figure 9:** Mariam Gundagundo church  
Source: Photograph by Asfaw and Gebreslassie, 2015

#### *Other Cultural Endowments*

Like the other tourism clusters of Tigray, the Wukro Tourism Cluster is endowed with different cultural performances like the Meskel Celebration, Hura Seleste and Tihlo traditional food.





**Figures10-13:** Cultural endowments

Source: Photograph by Asfaw and Gebreslassie, 2015

### *Wukro Museum*

The construction of museum in Wukro was primarily connected with the necessity of appropriately protecting and exhibiting the archaeological record of recent discoveries in the area of Wukro and the expecting of new discoveries in the coming years. The community of Wukro dedicated the site of the town's; old electricity generator building for the museum. This generator building is integrated into the museum. The site museum size is around 4500 sq. m. The masonry work of the Wukro museum resembles that of traditional houses of Tigray.



**Figures 14-15:** Objects from Wakarida and Zala Arcaeological Site

Source: Photograph by Asfaw and Gebreslassie, 2016



**Figures 16-17:** Temple from Meqabr Ga'ewa  
Source: Photograph by Asfaw and Gebreslassie, 2015



**Figure 18:** Statue from Meqabr Ga'ewa  
Source: Photograph by Asfaw and Gebreslassie, 2016

## 2.2. Study Methods

### Research Design

There are shifts for management and tourism researchers to employ more mixed approaches rather than just quantitative or qualitative research to take the relative strengths of both approaches (Pansiri, 2005). The linkage between mixing methods and strategic alliances, collaboration and networking in heritage and tourism is

fundamental to increase quality. So, this study focusing on the practices of heritage interpretation and presentation in Tigray; cases from the Wukro Cluster is mainly descriptive in its design as its main rationale is to describe and interpret existing conditions and effects that are evident in relation to the interpretation and presentation of heritage. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to answer the questions of the study through interview, questionnaire and observation.

#### *Target Population/ Subjects*

In order to ensure the reliability and validity of the study, the researchers targeted key stakeholders of heritage and tourism management in the case study and have included mainly tourism service providers from the cluster; professionals of Tourism, Heritage and Archaeology from different educational institutions; experts from Tigray Culture and Tourism Agency and Wukro cluster area; local community representatives and visitors.

#### *Sampling Design and Sample Size*

Most of the time, it is impossible or unfeasible to include the whole target population in the study as it may be unmanageable and costly. Hence, to take representative sample from the target population, non-probability sampling designs (convenience and purposive) were used. This sampling method is helpful to take the right informants who have deep knowledge about the issues under consideration and provide thorough discussion. Based on this, data was collected from 120 respondents (35 tourism and heritage professionals, 30 service providers mainly guides and 55 visitors). Interviews were purposively conducted with 14 representatives from the target population based on their knowledge and responsibility to get detail clarification on the issues. The size of interviewees was determined based on the maturity/saturation of data and the level to which triangulated data were found for other data collected through other instruments.

#### *Sources of Data and Research Instruments*

To achieve the objective of the study, data were collected from both secondary and primary sources by employing combined research methods of multiple data sources. Secondary data is used for background information to build constructively the research and the reader to comprehend more thoroughly the research outcomes. So, the researchers make use of different data sources including books, journals, magazines, websites, policy documents and memos reports.

Primary data were collected by applying questionnaire, semi-structured interview, personal observation and informal discussions to get first hand information on-site. The questionnaires used in the study have both close-ended and open-ended questions. Interviews were used to minimize misunderstanding and to get detailed information of the problem under investigation. The researchers also conducted

physical observations to the heritage sites of the study area. Triangulation of data between the qualitative and quantitative techniques was undertaken to get a more thorough understanding of the issues under consideration.

### 3. Results and Discussion

This part deals with the results and discussion of data collected through the different data collection instruments from the targeted subjects of the study. Hence, the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the results of the assessment on the practices of heritage interpretation and presentation in Wukro Tourism Cluster are discussed here.

#### 3.1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

To collect the needed primary data, 150 questionnaires were distributed to different respondents and only 120 (80%) were returned and used for analysis.

**Table 1:** Demographic characteristics of respondents

Variables	Categories of responses	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	80	66.7
	Female	40	33.3
	Total	120	100
Level of education	Certificate	20	16.7
	Diploma	40	33.3
	First degree	40	33.3
	Masters and above	20	16.7
	Other		
	Total	120	100
Category	Tourism and Heritage Professional	35	29.2
	Service Provider	30	25
	Visitor	55	45.8
	Total	120	100

Source: Survey, 2016

The above table shows that, among the 120 respondents, 66.7% were male and 33.3% female participants may be indicating higher involvement of male participants in the heritage and tourism sector of the study area. Of all the respondents, 45.8% were visitors and 29.2% professionals of heritage, tourism and related areas working in different educational institutions, Tigray Culture and Tourism and Wukro Cluster Culture and Tourism Bureau.

Interview was conducted with fourteen purposefully selected respondents. These were two guides; four expert from Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau; two heritage guardians; two church representatives and four local community representatives.

### 3.2. Challenges of Heritage Interpretation and Presentation Practices

Successful interpretation is critical both for the effective management of heritage sites and for the development of sustainable tourism in Wukro Tourism Cluster by promoting understanding, appreciation and respect to the heritages. Thus, this subsection deals with the prevailing practices of heritage interpretation and presentation in Wukro Tourism Cluster.

**Table 2:** Respondents' responses on the challenges and adequacy of heritage interpretation and presentation practices in Wukro Tourism Cluster

Indicator Phrases	Relative Responses									
	VP*		PR		AV		GD		VG	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Awareness on the values of heritage interpretation and presentation	45	37.5	30	25	35	29	10	8.5		
Quantity of interpretive infrastructures	60	50	45	37.5	15	12.5				
Quality of interpretation infrastructures	30	25	35	29.2	40	33.3	15	12.5		
Information provided at tourist information center/s			20	16.7	70	58.3	20	16.7	10	8.3

VP\*= Very Poor, PR= Poor, AV= Average, GD= Good, VG= Very Good, F= Frequency, %= Percentage

Source: Survey, 2016

As can be deduced from the table above, majority of the values of the challenges of heritage interpretation and presentation indicators are scaled below average. This reveals that the interpretation and presentation practices in the Wukro Tourism Cluster are embedded with plenty of challenges.

#### Quantity and Quality of Interpretation Infrastructures

One of the main problems noted here is non-existent of orientation and identification panels that can aid visitors and others to find their way to/within the various heritage sites of Wukro Tourism Cluster and nearby endowments. Many independent visitors used to miss important attractions with interesting collections due to the absence of identification panels in such heritages. A set of well designed, interlinked panels can make an itinerary which cover sites of cultural, traditional and environmental

significances. Such interlinked and well developed panels can contribute more to draw visitors' attention to the many attractions of the cluster, thus encouraging them to spend a longer stay by visiting the whole attractions indirectly reducing the load on the popular sites and contributing to the sustainability of the heritages by pointing the dos and don'ts in such heritages. Lack of interpretation or presentation panels to interpret or present the individual heritages except the commentary of guides is also another critical problem. Absence of explanatory materials (brochures, folders, fliers, maps, postcards, books) to supplement what the guides may say and that can be taken away with the visitors and others' who are interested is still another problem. Generally, Information and interpretation is highly insufficient and it is very difficult to have own tour without guides for those tourists that are not traveling with organized or guided groups. Thus, developing bilingual or multilingual direction and interpretation channels aided by explanatory materials is an issue which needs critical focus in the cluster. Such interpretation infrastructures can also serve as a means of check and balance to the inconsistency of delivery that may occur during guiding. The qualities of the rarely seen interpretation infrastructures like direction and orientation panels are also assessed as below average. The existing direction and orientation panels are full of different barriers mainly related with intellectual barrier, sensory barrier, organizational barrier, physical barriers and related issues. So, while trying to expand the quantities of interpretation; focus should be given to the language, content clarity, organization, color, location and scale of the interpretive infrastructures.

#### *Information Provided at Tourist Information Center*

In order to organize and provide structured tourism, visitor care and information; tourism information centers can play a leading role. Such center helps to establish direct contact to visitors and reduce influence of illegal vendors and other disturbances. The center can also play roles like offering information and guidance on endowments and highlight specialties of the cluster, providing tourism information material, providing information on different costs (including entrance fees, accommodation costs, transportation costs, guide hire rates and others), visitor management and spreading good practices to service providers and others. The center may have also another role as substitution. Because some cultural and natural heritage resources are considered vulnerable and are not accessible, the visitor center will be an appropriate place to display and interpret the original materials or artifacts gathered from the sites.

The Cluster's Culture and Tourism Bureau in its specific section is trying to provide information for visitors and others. The analysis and description of data collected from the respondents' show that the performance of the tourist information center in Wukro Tourism Cluster or the service provided by the center is below average. This implies that the aforementioned roles and services that a tourist information center can play are not successful.

Lack of transparency on prices (mainly on transportation and local guide hire) and lack of information on operating hours of sites, ticket sale office and lack of explanatory materials (even very hard to get simple fliers) are the repeatedly stated problems by



visitors. Such problems could have been solved by establishing a well-organized tourism information center/s which is rich of resources and information.

### 3.3. Existing and Needed Competencies of Heritage Interpreters and Presenters

Heritage interpreters and presenters are considered as informal ambassadors of a given country. They play great role in creating or spoiling the image of a given country/destination. So, to sustain the heritages of a given destination, develop good image of a destination and satisfy visitors; heritage interpreters and presenters need to possess certain competencies. Hence, in this part of the study issues related with the existing and needed competencies of heritage interpreters and presenters in Wukro Tourism Cluster are discussed in detail.

**Table 3:** Respondents' responses on the existing and needed competencies

Indicator Phrases	Relative Responses									
	VP*		PR		AV		GD		VG	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Habit of conducting research, training and development in interpretation and presentation	15	12.5	35	29.2	55	45.8	15	12.5		
The practice of using well researched sources and living cultural traditions to interpret the heritages	40	33.3	55	45.8	22	18.3	3	2.5		
Guidelines and manuals regarding interpretation and presentation	48	40	22	18.3	35	29.2	15	12.5		
The inclusion of new sites in the itinerary and interpretation of companies	56	46.7	44	36.7	20	16.7				
Access to professionals in heritage interpretation and presentation	60	50	40	33.3	15	12.5	5	4.2		
Knowledge and experiences of interpreters on the tourist destination			5	4.2	75	62.5	25	20.8	15	12.5
General employability skills of Heritage Interpreters and presenters			40	33.3	70	58.3	8	6.7	2	1.7

Source: Survey, 2016

The above table shows that there is great gap between the current performance of heritage interpreters and the expected/needed performances of these heritage interpreters and presenters in the Wukro Tourism Cluster showing the acuteness of the problems in heritage interpretation and presentation.

### *Research, Training and Development in Heritage Interpretation and Presentation*

Continuous research, training, and development are among the essential components of the sustainable interpretation of heritages. Interpretation of a heritage sites should not be considered to be completed with the completion of a specific interpretive infrastructures (ICOMOS, 2008).

Collaborative regular review, evaluation and consultation are integral elements in the interpretation programme and such programs need to be designed in a way that facilitates ongoing revision and expansion. Hence, on-site and off-site training of human resource in the specialized areas of heritage interpretation and presentation, such as content creation, management, technology, guiding and education is crucial.

Trainings are vital to developing guides from basic understanding to theoretical base. Tour guides normally have basic understanding about the places they are touring but training courses that increase guides' ability and effectiveness of interpreting including field courses, research, and theory is crucial.

The practice of conducting research, training and evaluation of heritage interpretation in Wukro Tourism Cluster is assessed as average and below. These working as museum experts in the Wukro museum and the custodians at the different church museums are lacking training on their job except meetings and gatherings for political and social cases. Even for the guides, although there are some trials to give training, most of them are not successful due to different problems including arrangement of training during peak seasons, failure to conduct prior need assessment and problems to get qualified trainers. In the past few years, there were some interpretation panels on some of the main sites, but are currently either totally destroyed due to lack of follow up and maintenances on such interpretation and orientation panels or difficulty to identify may be because of aging.

### *Information Sources and Practice of Using Living Culture in Interpretation*

Interpretation and presentation of heritages can be considered as sustainable if it is done based on evidence gathered through accepted scientific and multi-disciplinary scholarly methods as well as from living cultural traditions and legends. At heritage sites like the Wukro Tourism Cluster where mythology and story have great values, heritage interpretation has also to incorporate such oral testimonies directly through the active participation of members of the local community. Only presenting the history sometimes makes visitors feel bored and they will not be interested in the interpretation and presentation anymore. Lack of knowledge of tour guides about the entire site can discourage visitors whose expectation is to gain further interpretation of the site rather than history written in guide books. In addition, the visitors would appreciate the tour guides who have a wide general knowledge about the site.

Based on the analysis and description of the surveyed data; the practice of using archaeological facts and living culture during the interpretation and presentation of heritages in Wukro Tourism Cluster is assessed as very poor and poor by majority of

the respondents. It was replied by most of the visitors that most of the interpreters focus on story and legend.

The practice of using well known story tellers of the town during interpretation is also omitted in this legend and story full area. Even most of the commentaries in the churches are made by external guides excluding the main agents like monks, priests and others who have direct contact with the churches. Generally, most guided interpretations in the cluster are based on legend and hypothesis and accurate information based on documented and archived archaeological investigation is always missing.

#### *Guidelines and Manuals of Heritage Interpretation and Presentation*

As per the data from the respondents, there is lack of heritage interpretation manuals and guidelines in the cluster. Absence of well organized manual developed based on the reports of archaeological findings and legend to be used as a commentary benchmark for guides is stated as the main problem leading to inconsistent and fallacy interpretations by guides. There are also times when guards and other individuals give guiding service without any training and manual (especially for domestic) when guides are busy and such occasion leads also to inconsistent and fallacy interpretation. The researcher have practically observed this when a guard was giving commentary at Meqber Ga'ewa Archaeological Site.

#### *The Inclusion of New Sites in to Itinerary and Interpretation*

As per the data from the survey of respondents, the practice of introducing new tourism products/sites in to the existing touring itinerary of the cluster is seen as poor and very poor. Although the cluster is endowed with plenty of manmade and natural heritages to be sold and interpreted for tourists, the heritage interpreters are simply focusing on the known heritages only in a redundant manner.

#### *Access to Heritage Interpretation and Presentation Professionals*

Visiting the different heritages in the cluster is best experienced with a tour guide who speaks the local language (Tigrinya) and English and is knowledgeable about the geographical terrain, local customs and communities, and the churches' artistic and historical attributes.

Access to heritage professionals for the sustainable interpretation and presentation of heritages is still scaled as poor and very poor by the respondents. There is lack of well organized and trained guides in the cluster. This can be easily justified by the number of heritage interpreters at the cluster and regional levels. The authorized guides working in this huge and rapidly growing cluster are also very few when compared with the potential of heritage tourism in the area. Most of the time the churches and their treasure houses are found closed may be because of lack of adequate heritage interpreters and presenters.

*Basic Employability Skills of Heritage Interpreters and Presenters/ Mainly Tour Guides*

In general, guides are the main/only interpretation tools used in Wukro Tourism Cluster and the basic employability skill of the authorized interpreters/guides is almost rated as average and above. But still many problems are existent with the guides and services provided by guides from different perspectives. In recent times, visitors are becoming more sophisticated and are invariably well informed, and will expect the heritage interpreter/tour guide to be even more knowledgeable, up to date with the most recent archaeological discoveries and interpretations.

Some of the main problems noted with the heritage interpreters/ guides include low visibility( guides are lacking specific official badges and specific uniforms or T-shirts); lack of information kit to be given to the tourists; welcoming or introduction problems; disturbances of unauthorized tour guides; unfair competition; unclear rates (sometimes the guides ask for higher rates to tourists); lack of consistency and coherence of both legends and facts; ethical problems (due to lack of knowledge on code of conducts and ethics); and lack of multi-lingual guides (all guides give commentary only in English).

Limited knowledge and knowhow on the history of the sites with their surrounding areas and problem of updating themselves with recent findings are also another problems. Misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the sites are mostly caused by language barriers and a lack of knowledge in cultural understanding. A language barrier is known as the major issue in communication and presentation of the heritage.

*3.4. Contribution of Heritage Interpretation and Presentation for Sustaining Tourists' Satisfaction and Heritage Significances*

**Table 4:** Respondents' responses on the contribution of sustainable heritage interpretation and presentation for sustaining tourists' satisfaction and heritage significances

Indicator Phrases	Relative Responses									
	VP*		PR		AV		GD		VG	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
The extent to which interpretation & presentation respects heritage authenticity and integrity	25	20.8	55	45.8	35	29.2	5	4.2		
Interpretation's level of encouragement to stakeholders' inclusiveness	80	66.7	25	20.8	15	12.5				
The application of the concept of carrying capacity	33	27.5	32	26.7	40	33.3	10	8.3	5	4.2
Mechanisms to prevent theft and other illicit trafficking activities	30	25	40	33.3	45	37.5	5	4.2		
Contribution of interpretation and	45	37.5	40	33.3	33	27.5	2	1.7		

presentation to heritage conservation						5				
Contribution of interpretation and presentation on tourists' satisfaction	40	33.3	42	35	30	25	8	6.7		
Relative evaluation on the success of heritage interpretation & presentation practices of Wukro Cluster compared with other tourism clusters of Tigray	20	19	25	24	40	38	20	19		
Overall evaluation on the sustainability of interpretation and presentation	25	20.8	55	45.8	30	25	9	7.5	1	0.9

Source: Survey, 2016

The responses in the table above still show that the sustainability of heritage interpretation and presentation in the cluster and its contribution for visitor satisfaction and heritage management is full of problems. Majority of the indicators are rated as very poor, poor and average.

#### *Authenticity and Integrity of Interpretation*

As stated by ICOMOS (2008), interpretation of heritages should respect the authenticity and integrity of heritages by communicating the significance of their tangible and intangible values in their actual setting and protecting them from the adverse impact of intrusive interpretive infrastructure, visitor pressure and inaccurate or inappropriate interpretation.

But in the case of Wukro Tourism Cluster, such type of interpretation is almost not practiced. Majority of the respondents assessed these issues as below average (poor and very poor). There are no designed interpretation programs and infrastructures that show the previous functions of the sites and the cultural practices of the locals. Guided interpretations given in the cluster are also highly focused on history of the sites and usually escape the political, economic and environmental values of the sites at different times. Interpretation in the cluster is still highly object specific and the surrounding landscape; natural environment; geographical setting; cultural and spiritual traditions including stories, dance and local customs and culinary heritage are not always integrated in interpretation programs. Generally, there is no system which ties the heritage sites together or which allows for their interpretation by visitors to the cluster or by residents of the area in an organized way.

Tour guides and other concerned bodies need to be hold to their authenticity and be familiar with the principles of authentic and integrated interpretation backed by applying them in their routine activities. The lacking identification marks of the tour guides like badge, dress code or some other distinctive feature should also be designed in consistent with the culture of the people in the study area. It will be even very important if the lacking interpretation center is constructed in a modest way using local stone and traditional details by training and using local labor which can contribute to the pride and sense of ownership development of the locals. Therefore, themed and well integrated interpretation route to interpret the heritages of Wukro Tourism Cluster in an authentic, coherent, and integrated manner is crucial.

### *Inclusiveness of Interpretation*

Interpretations of heritage sites need to be the result of collaborative work between tourism and heritage professionals; host and associated communities; and other stakeholders to be successful and accessible to the interested including the general public (ICOMOS, 2008). It is only when interpretation programs are done in a collaborative system that stakeholders can be communicated about the importance of heritage conservation, their interests on the heritages, the needed varieties of interpretation for varieties of audiences and the need to provide off-site interpretation in cases when the site is sensitive, under conservation or for safety issues.

The surveyed data about the inclusiveness of heritage interpretation in Wukro Tourism Cluster replied its very poor performance by majority of the respondents. An informal talk with a tourist yields that; “guides do not promote inclusiveness of interpretation and they try to control information and hinder communication with locals and other stakeholders”. As per the data from guide informants, the main thing that is hindering them not to deliver an inclusive and extended interpretation in the cluster is the problem that mainly emanate from the itinerary. It is stated that: “*Most of the tourists come to the cluster after visiting almost all parts of Ethiopia and their length of stay in the cluster is very short. So, it is very difficult to practice an inclusive and extended guiding service within this short period of time*”.

Tour operators and travel agents may have an indirect influence on interpretation made by tour guides. Tour operators have an influence on tour guide’s professionalism. Visitors might think that tour guides sometimes spend little time for interpreting the site. Visitors complained about the unethical practices of tour guides who focus only on their personal income without presenting much about the value of cultural heritage sites. Tour operators may be associated in this issue because they have greater power than tour guides. These tour operators usually arrange itineraries which include historical sightseeing, shopping and other activities for visitors. Tour guides just follow the itinerary set by tour operators so they sometimes try their best to interpret the heritage sites.

### *Interpretation’s Contribution to Sustainable Conservation of Heritage*

The interpretation plan and activity for heritage sites need to be sensitive to the authenticity and integrity of the natural and cultural environments. It should also be an integral part of the overall planning, conservation and management process of the heritage sites. The success of sustainable heritage interpretation should not be evaluated only on the basis of visitor attendance figures; but also, based on its continuous wide range of conservational, educational, economic and cultural objectives.

Conservation of the site is one of the objectives of interpretation. Tour guides make a point that through their interpretation, visitors could take part in preservation and protection of heritage. In order to get help from visitors, the initial need for the

tour guides is their high understanding of the heritage and how to preserve and conserve it.

As per the data from the respondents, interpretation's contribution for the conservation of heritages in Wukro Tourism Cluster is assessed as below average. Good examples noted here are, guides used to touch different sensitive treasures like manuscripts during their commentary in the church museums and they used to climb and walk through fragile areas to show the visitors. The crowded treasures in the treasure houses of the different churches of the cluster are scattered here and there without showcase glasses. Generally there are no interpretation and presentation infrastructures that promote conservation ethics with the dos and don'ts.

#### *Application of the Concept of Carrying Capacity*

In fact at present, the number of visitors to the heritages of Wukro Tourism Cluster is not that much high compared to its resources. However, more tourists are expected to increase in the near future. Hence, visitor management strategy developed in consultation with all relevant stakeholders and application of common practices to manage visitors is crucial.

The respondents of the study demonstrated that the practices of actual control of visitors during peak times/religious festivals and application of carrying capacity concept are still below average. Everyone with ticket enters to the heritages without any management. The carrying capacity of the sites is not yet studied and the heritages (especially churches) are accommodating beyond their capacity especially during major festivals and different group visits like the visits of "know your country clubs" and university students. The researcher practically observed that visitors want to stay out (especially at the churches) only when they think that it is highly crowded and can cause problem on their health because of suffocation. It is also common to look visitors touching different sensitive treasures in the churches.

Generally, the practices of sustainable visitor management in Wukro Tourism Cluster are rated as poor. Interventions on heritage development and management to attract new types of visitors may be interested in trekking or events planned throughout the year are very low in the cluster. Although there are different churches that can be included into the tour itinerary, only few accessible churches are included in the itineraries. Consequently, crowd management practices need to be developed at different levels, linking actions between demand, destination and heritage management for the sake of fulfilling the interests of visitors, the heritages visited and other involved bodies in a compatible way.

Other critical issues noted here are the cases of entrance fees and free entrance letters. To minimize confusion of visitors, proper adjustments should be made on the uniformity of entrance fees of different sites in the cluster in parallel with developing different experiences and facilities. Free entrance letters written by different offices are also seen as unacceptable by most of the approached informants. An informant from a church expressed that:

*“Different government offices write cooperation letters for free entrances of their employees beginning from the federal ministry level to local level schools and know your country clubs. The issue here is that such individuals are expending a lot in hotels and other entertainment areas, but looking not to pay entrance fee which can have multiple purposes for the existence of the heritages and the development of the country as a whole. Discount can be tolerable for students and know your country clubs. So, such activities need to be changed especially for those who are able to pay and good practices of other regions need to be considered here in Wukro Tourism Cluster”.*

Revenue from visitor fees at heritage attractions are critical to develop visitor facilities as well as to preserve heritage settings. Admission fee revenue can also be used to improve heritage interpretation and educational activities.

### *Heritage Interpretation and Visitor Satisfaction*

Heritage interpretation and education are among the soft visitor management techniques. Interpretation is one of the important tools to achieve successful visitor management and heritage education. Tour guides need to be aware of characteristics of the group. When the tour guides know the background of their group of visitors, they can have different tactics to manage interpretation effectively. But different experiences and facilities in different areas of the study area like the hospitality area, cultural performances, security and safety, merchandizing and others are having plenty of shortcomings. There is no real management looking at the needs of the tourists and the heritages and trying to make things more attractive and successful.

The system of arranging the tour guides, the ticket offices and related issues are also taken as inflexible, misleading, less diversified and hindrances in the management and satisfaction of visitors. It is common in the cluster to look independent visitors returning back from the heritages to the town because of inflexible and less diversified ticketing system. The devastating thing here is most domestic independent visitors are less tolerable to obstacles and they return simply without visiting the heritages by simply taking photographs near to the heritages because of lack of access to entrance tickets at the appropriate location.

### *3.5. Overall Success of Heritage Interpretation Practices in Wukro Tourism Cluster*

Respondents have scaled the relative evaluation on the success of heritage interpretation and presentation in Wukro Tourism Cluster with other tourism clusters of Tigray as average and below. This implies that the interpretation and presentation practices in the cluster are facing problems even when compared with the other tourism clusters within Tigray.



It is also reflected by most of the surveyed respondents that, being a rapidly growing tourism cluster in Tigray, the overall success of heritage interpretation and presentation practices in Wukro Tourism Cluster is not successful as expected due to several bottlenecks. Limitations related with number and capability of professionals; minimum attention to the values of heritage interpretation and presentation; problems with long term planning; short term profit oriented service providers; weak organizational structure and capacity of the cluster bureau; problems of variety and quality in visitor experiences; problems of stakeholder involvement; and lack of organized interpretation and presentation practices are the main problems hindering success.

The development of community-based heritage tourism that addresses current inequalities in tourism development and benefit sharing by helping communities in assessing their tourism assets, positioning their products in terms of quality and authenticity, and anticipating potential adverse impacts on the heritage is a good requirement to get the help of the general public in the overall sustainable management and development of the heritage in Wukro Tourism Cluster. Strict regulations and follow ups are also must during and after giving license for service providers, as only few individuals are dominating the whole tourism and heritage business. Such individuals are also becoming bottlenecks for the development of sustainable heritage tourism. My informal discussion with new graduates of tourism and heritage having guiding license, reveal the difficulty they are suffering to break in to the practical guiding service because of different informal blockages from the existing guides.

## **Conclusion**

The primary aim of this study was to assess the practices of heritage interpretation and presentation in Tigray with a special focus in Wukro Tourism Cluster. The quantity of interpretation and presentation infrastructures, quality of the infrastructures, competencies needed by heritage interpreters and presenters, contribution of sustainable heritage interpretation for visitor satisfaction and maintaining heritage significances and related issues were discussed in detail in this study. Based on the assessment of the issues, the heritage interpretation and presentation practices in Wukro Tourism Cluster are embedded with different shortcomings.

Heritage interpretation and presentation as a whole and sustainable heritage interpretation in particular are full of pitfalls and problems in Wukro Tourism Cluster. Direction panels, interpretation panels, explanatory materials, organized and resourceful tourist information center are lacking. Hence, it is very difficult to have independent tour to the heritage sites of the cluster.

Interpretation in Wukro Tourism Cluster is mainly conducted by guides and the guides are with different capacity and ethical limitations. The guiding service is always based on hypothesis and legend which always lead to inconsistent and fallacy interpretation. Absence of well organized manuals developed based on the reports of archaeological findings and legend to be used as a commentary benchmark for guides is identified as

the main problem leading to fallacy and inconsistent interpretations in Wukro Tourism Cluster.

The heritage sites of Wukro Tourism Cluster are not clean, and trash bins and regular cleaners are omitted in the heritage sites. In addition to such sanitation problems, easy and organized movement to and within the heritage sites is hindered by different infrastructural and social factors like that of lack of road, lighting system and absence of interconnected walkways.

Carrying capacity of the sites is not studied and no common practices are applied to manage visitors during major festivals and group visits to fragile areas. So, it can be concluded that crowd management linking actions between demand, destination and heritage management for the sake of fulfilling the interests of visitors, the heritage visited and other involved bodies in a compatible way is lacking in Wukro Tourism Cluster.

The sustainable interpretation indicators of authentic, inclusive, integrated, living, conservation based and well researched interpretation concepts are also missed in the cluster as there is no system which ties the heritage sites together or which allows for their interpretation by visitors to the cluster in an organized and scientific way.

In a nutshell, the sustainability of heritage interpretation and tourism development in Wukro Tourism Cluster is facing a lot of unfavorable factors. These include limitation in number and capacity of professionals, inadequate legal base and system of heritage management and interpretation, uncoordinated development, scant attention to community based heritage and tourism management, problems in variety and quality of visitor experiences, lack of organized interpretation and presentation and limitations of resources.

## References

- Amare Yaekob. (2012). The Image of Ethiopia as a Tourist Destination. M.A thesis, Addis Ababa University.
- Australia Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Center. (2008). Culture and heritage tourism research informing policy and planning understanding the issues and success factors: Australia.
- Cannon B. (2009). Investment Opportunities in Mekelle, Tigray State, Ethiopia. Millennium Cities Initiative and Vale Columbia Center Working Paper Series on Investment in the Millennium Cities: New York.
- European Association for Heritage Interpretation. (2011). "Interpret Europe". Friburg.
- European foresight Platform. (2012). Future of Cultural Heritage: Impact of external developments. Brussels.
- Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. (2000). A Proclamation to Provide for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage in Negarit Gazeta, 209. June 2000.
- Fontaine F. (2005). Stakeholder collaboration in the tourism planning of a World Heritage Site: The case study of the Valley of the Temples in Agrigento (Italy). M.A thesis, Bournemouth University.
- Heritage Lottery Fund. (2009). Thinking about... Interpretation. London.
- ICCROM. (2000). A Global Training Strategy for Cultural Heritage to Improve Implementation of the World Heritage Convention.
- ICOMOS. (2008). The ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites. Quebec.
- Mitchell J. and Coles C. (2009). Enhancing private sector and community engagement in tourism services in Ethiopia. Overseas Development Institute.
- Mohamed M. (2010). Heritage and Tourism an Approach to Urban Conservation: Case Study of Dubai –UAE. Dubai.
- Pansiri J. (2005). Pragmatism: A Methodological Approach to Researching Strategic Alliances in Tourism in Tourism and Hospitality Planning & Development (191-206). University of Ballarat: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.

Pedersen A. (2002). *Managing Tourism at World Heritage Sites: a Practical Manual for World Heritage Site Managers*. Paris: UNESCO World Heritage Center.

UNESCO. (2007). *Tourism at Cultural Heritage Sites in Asia Cultural Heritage Specialist Guide Training and Certification Programme for UNESCO World Heritage Sites; A Training Manual for Heritage Guides*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition.

UNESCO. (2008). *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*. Paris: UNESCO World Heritage Center.

UNESCO. (2010). *World Heritage and Cultural Diversity*. German: German Commission for UNESCO.

United Nation. (2008). *Cultural Tourism Sites Management: A Training Manual for Trainers in the Greater Mekong Sub region*.

Worku Derara. (2010). *Training in Archaeology and Heritage Management in Higher Education Institutions in Ethiopia*. Proceedings of the First Annual Workshop of the Ethiopian Association, Addis Ababa: National Printing Press.

World Bank. (2006). *Ethiopia in Makeda's Footsteps: Towards a Strategy for Pro-Poor Tourism*.

World Federation of Tourist Guides Association. (2009). *Guidelines International*. Vienna.

Yechale Mehiret. (2011). *Tourism certification as a tool for promoting sustainability in the Ethiopian tourism industry: the case of Addis Ababa*. M.A Thesis, Addis Ababa University.