

RESEARCH ARTICLE

**“TRADITIONAL” CULTURAL HERITAGE
MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN CHURCH PROPERTY:
THE CASE OF DEBRE MEDAHNIT DEKWA
KIDANEMIHRET, ETHIOPIA**

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ABSTRACT

Ethiopian monasteries and churches are home to substantial material culture, storing frontiers of knowledge from the sacred to the secular. Debre Medahnit Dekwa Kidanemihret, located in Dabat woreda, is the repository of a number of cultural heritages, with significant historical values. However, some of these heritages are in a critical state of preservation. Hence, concerns emerge on the existing cultural heritage management practice in the study area, as preservation of the landscape is an urgent obvious task. This paper investigates the ‘traditional’ cultural heritage management practices of the church. The paper focuses on practices of local and scientific cultural heritage conservation. The data for the study are primary sources, such as letters and reports, found in archives in Gondar town as well as oral information. The study found that a combination of indigenous knowledge and faith conservation was the existing heritage conservation practice. It is recommended that these traditional methods and native intervention should be appreciated with a further attempt to integrate them into scientific cultural heritage management practices.

Keywords: cultural heritage management, indigenous knowledge, monasteries, Dekwa Kidanemihret, Dabat

INTRODUCTION

History is comprised of many layers of accumulated collective memory. Human societies have created enormous heritages associated to their religious beliefs and practices. The human acknowledgement of the sacred character of the surrounding natural world has been an important part in human civilization (Sergew, 1972, p. 372). Religious values are present in all the human families; they govern many societies’ lives, from the cradle to the grave, providing a defining link between the individual and the universe. In many societies, this heritage concentrates on most of the arts and skills (Wright, 1957, p. 76). As such, it constitutes a major document and a unique witness to the human endeavour and its achievements (Ibid; also, ICOMOS, 2010).

The heritage of Ethiopia is undeniably rich and largely diversified as several civilizations have prospered in the country. The richness of the heritage in

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Ethiopia is represented in many ways both in the religious world and in its secular life (Wright, 1957, p. 52). The heritage places linked to religious practices are numerous and greatly diversified. This heritage comprises of individual or groups of buildings, sites as well as vast and complex areas such as holy cities, sacred landscapes (including those formed by ancient place names) and pilgrimage routes, all of these being the type of “monuments and sites”. Religious objects, archives and documents as well as the rites, rituals and traditions are invaluable religious heritages (National Archive of India, 1993). These heritages reflect the religious practices with which they are associated.

Owing to their significance for the local community, as well as due to their artistic, historical, anthropological importance, it comes as no surprise that religious buildings and/or sites make up a considerable part of national or local heritage lists (Pankhurst, 1968, p. 112). This situation is echoed in the World Heritage list which includes over one hundred sites listed under an explicit religious reference, mainly temples, churches, monasteries and/or sacred mountains. In addition, a great majority of the cultural or mixed sites on the list cover territories which include sacred places as in the case of historic towns or cultural landscapes (Tunprawat, 2009, p. 341).

In many countries, cultural heritage legislation concerning the management includes specific clauses related to religious properties (Gasiorowski, 1981, p. 4). Besides these legal specificities, the question of religious heritage offers opportunities to develop conservation guidelines and management tools. As far as religious cultural heritage is concerned, Ethiopia occupies a unique place among the Sub-Saharan African countries for having evolved its own language and literature (Pankhurst, 1968 p. 286). The tradition of documenting classical achievements in its own language was as remarkable as the development of its own language. Large numbers of Ge'ez works have emerged since at least the 5th century A.D. Since then, it became the primary responsibility of religious scholars to prepare writing materials locally. These scholars did their best in documenting the multilayered history of Ethiopia (Ibid). As history witnesses, countless heritages have already been eroded away due to incursion with modernization. Documentary heritages have been the target of looters during the years of national and local crisis of Ethiopia (Melaku, 1994, p.10).

The collective memory of any society is of vital importance in preserving cultural identities, in bridging the past and the present and in shaping the future. The documentary heritage maintained in some homes, libraries, palaces and archives constitute a major part of that memory and reflect the diversity of arts, languages and cultures of that society (Pankhurst, 1968, p. 112). But, that memory is fragile. The question remains: How much of that memory is being promoted and preserved by their custodians? Heritage of any kind is an important part of social, cultural and educational history of every nation. Traditionally, the mission of the custodians and their archives is to preserve written knowledge and cultural treasures, to collect present day information and disseminate it for future needs. However, there is still much to be desired in the attitude of those who are supposed to be the custodians of the cultural heritage in the area of promotion

and preservation for they have failed to do so in the Ethiopian context. Yet, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has proven fairly effective in protecting its treasures in spite of the fact that the management system is traditional and exclusory (Spencer, 1967, p. 56).

Despite the plethora of literature, a great number of the studies on heritage fail to provide an in-depth analysis of the management and preservation practices of religious heritages. *Debre Medahnit* Dekwa Kidanemihret located in Dabat woreda which hosts rich documentary heritage, is given lesser attention by the academic scholars, who are mainly historians and/or heritage professionals. Issues such as: what are the practices of heritage management in the church? How did the church leaders manage to preserve safely so many heritages in the church over the years? What are the unique techniques used? The manner in which the church officials should participate, the balance between varying and sometimes conflicting interests of the secular heritage authorities and the church are often disregarded. My intention here was to investigate the indigenous heritage management practice implemented in the *Debre Medahnit* Dekwa Kidanemihret.² The current status of those historical and cultural objects has been evaluated based on the conservation and management principles that take many aspects into account and require a wide range of professional skills.

For the study I collected written and oral data. On the one hand, I looked at the documents from the office of the North Gondar Zone Diocese situated in Gondar and from the Begemdir Governorate General Archival centre located in the same town (today North Gondar Zone Administration Historical Archives, NGZAHA), as well as at the proclamations on heritage conservation and preservation. On the other hand, in-depth interviews were conducted. The interviewees included religious officials from the *Debre Medahnit* Dekwa Kidanemihret and Gondar, the custodians of the church properties at Dekwa Kidanemihret and some informants from Woken *kebele* and Dabat town. In addition, in January 2016 a field visit to the church was conducted to examine the status of religious heritage found in the *Debr*. The visit counted with the support of North Gondar Zone Mahbere Kiddusan³ branch and the Diocese offices. The data collected were analyzed by using categorizing strategies (thematic analysis) and connecting narrative strategies (Maxwell, 2005, p. 96).

THE ORIGINS OF DEBRE MEDAHNIT DEKWA KIDANEMIHRET

Dekwa Kidanemihret is found about 90 kms far to the northeast of the historic city of Gondar and some 15 kms from Dabat town. It was established

² *Kidane Mihret* is a Ge'ez phrase which literally means 'covenant of mercy'. The phrase is used to refer to God's promise to St. Mary that he would forgive the sins of those who seek her intercession. Kidane Mihret also refers to Yekatit 16 (February 23), the day on which St. Mary received the promise. It is also observed on the 16th day of each month though not as colourfully as on February 23. The day marks one of the 33 feasts of St Mary.

³ Mahbere Kiddusan is a religious association established in 1991 under the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church with a license from the *Sinodos* (the highest administrative council in the Church).

by *atse* Adyam Seged Iyasu (Iyasu I), a Gondarine king who ruled from 1682-1706. The king was one of the most religiously ambitious rulers. He was also a very active ruler, who travelled continuously to different parts of the region leading military expeditions. On his way to the north to subdue the northern rivals, he spent some time in Dekwa, a village recently in Dabat town. According to the Ethiopian medieval tradition, during campaigns the kings used to be accompanied by a group of clergy who carried the *tabots*⁴ the king had a strong reverence to (Budge, 2000, p. 12). So, in the case of the battle of Adwa the clergy accompanied the king carrying the *tabot* of the church of St. George. Indeed, many Ethiopians credit the formidable victory of Adwa in 1896 to the intervention of St. George. In the royal chronicles of the Gondarine emperors the same phenomenon is recounted. When Iyasu's father, Emperor Yohannis I, embarked on a military expedition, 'before him went the *tabot* of Our Lady Maryam Siyon of Gimja Bet, and the image of Our Lord Jesus Christ called *Kwe'erata Re'esu...*' Later, too, in Emperor Iyasu II's time, a chronicle mentions the clergy of '*tabota tseyon* (the *tabot* of Zion), which is Gemja Bet' (informant *kesis Alemayehu*; see also Dereje, 1999, p. 89; Munro-Hay, 2005, p. 43).

As it was often the case, when *atse* Adyam Seged Iyasu went to Dekwa he was accompanied by the *tabot* of *Sheinu* Kidanemihret that he brought from Shewa. After their brief stay at Dekwa, the priest who carried the *tabot* was unable to move away despite the king's order. According to one of the informants in the study area, the King himself was a *deacon* and was forced to make liturgical and other religious services in a group of only three but in vain. After a long attempt to do so the king had a discussion with the local community about what happened for the last three days. The King said to the people to take care of the *tabot* so long as he would be back. One of the informants interestingly noted that they replied as “ንጉስ ያልቻላትን እኛ እንዴት እንችላለን”, which literally means “How we the ordinary people do what the king could not manage to do so.” Rather, the local community suggested:

“እኛ አይሆንልንም፤ የሚ ችል ከሆነና እግዚአብሔር ከፈቀደልዎት ከዚህ ጭ ካ ውስጥ አንድ የበቁ አበት አሉ ስማ ችውም አባ ሆሮ ይባላል ለርሳቸው ይስጧ ችው” Which meant, “We cannot do that rather if he can and if it is the will of God there is a man called *abba* Hor living in the nearby jungle, who is “righteous” and deserved to look after the ark on loan” (informant *qes Aklilu Desse*; informant *Melake Mihret Adane Abate*). This man was living alone dedicating his entire life to the Almighty God and was out of the sight of the ordinary people. The king accepted and did accordingly. Then, the king with his guard moved to the place silently⁵ where he was located and made hands clap three times mildly. *Abba* Hor came out from his place and talked to the king. The king

⁴ The *tabot* is popularly envisaged nowadays as a replica or representation of the Ark of the Covenant—or, perhaps, more strictly, of the tablets of the Law—at Aksum. This sort of symbolism means that there are many thousands of ‘Arks of the Covenant’ in Ethiopia today, since every church has at least one *tabot*; Munro-Hay, 2005, pp. 43-44.

⁵ The tradition in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is one should move voicelessly in and around the monastery not to disturb people inside since it is the place for praying.

told everything that happened in the last three days. Eventually, *abba* Hor accepted the proposal and carried the tabot, and departed soon.

Tradition says that when the king was back triumphantly from a campaign in the north after three years, around Messewa, he found that *abba* Hor had died but kept the ark without any damage (informant *melake mihret aba* Mulu Shitaneh). The king could not believe it. In their attempt to separate the ark from the dead body, the body crumbled into pieces. From this moment on the name *dekwa*, literally meaning 'fall to pieces', was given to the place (informant *qes* Fente Teshome). The king was so overwhelmed and dwelled by what happened at this place that he took on to establish a church for the ark of Kidanemihret (Anfray, 1988-89, pp. 11-12). After accomplishing the construction the king acclaimed the church that “ጤ ህሊ ገገት ዳሯ ሰት”, which literally means “the inner part is paradise and the outer part is like fire”. According to the informants, if a man who killed another found refuge in the church he would be free and no one could offend him. The mercy is given because he is found in the inner part of the church referred as a place of peace.

Ato Mamo Getahun is a popular professional in maintaining Gondarine buildings by using lime stone and other local materials. He has made maintenance in the Fasil Castle, the Fasil bath and now Dekwa Kidanemihret. According to *abba* Mulu Shitaneh, the first man who was entitled to administer the church was *abba* Faga and *aleqa* Sebhat was one of the administrators of the church but from Ledeta Mariam, Gondar. By now, it is *Melake Mihret* Adanc Abate (one of the potential informants of this work) who is in charge of administering the church.

Iyasu I fully sponsored the construction of Dekwa Kidanemihret and employed seventy seven *debtera* and other religious men in order for the church to offer uninterrupted service. Land grant was common for those who served the church in different ways (informants *qes* Fente Teshome, *qes* Aklilu Desse; see also, Crummey, 2011, p. 101; Shumet, 1984, p. 88). Since at the time there was no fixed salary or daily payment, land was the only means to secure a living. *Debre Medahnit* Dekwa Kidanemihret had given 25 *rim* from the king located in Tenseye, Dekwa, Anora, Mereba, Janora meda and the surrounding (informant *Melake Mihret aba* Mulu Shitaneh). This *rim* land was a kind of *gult* right vested to the church. Even though, most scholars consider *gult* to be a right to land, it had also been characterized as a right to control the manpower of the peasants living on the land (Hobe, 1973, p. 5). *Gult* rights were not actually inheritable in the study church or not necessarily hereditary (informant *qes* Mihret Wolde Mariam; Pauseng, 1983, p. 17). The land was given to the church but distributed to its servants who transferred some portions of the produce to the

⁶ *Debtera* is a general term given to all those who have completed school of the church. It also refers to the educated lay clergy in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church who are employed to prepare amulets (little leather cases containing magical prayers and formulas written in Ge'ez which are worn around the neck or arm (Bairu, 1986, p. 8; Shenk, 1988, p. 266). The *debteras* are a class of non-priests unique to the Ethiopian Church. They are experts in reading and liturgical song and are administrators of the church's traditional wisdom.

church. When the clergy died, the land was taken away and given to the other clergy assigned for the position because it was not hereditary.

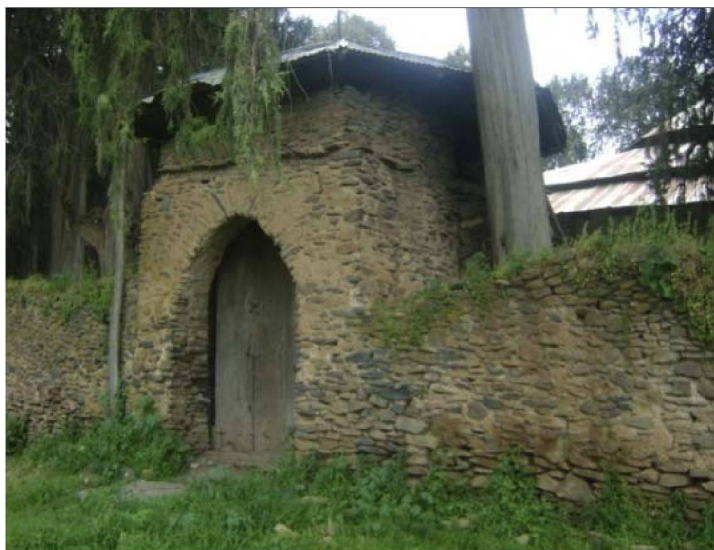


Figure 1: *The gate of the church towards the north.*
Source: Photo Marshet Girmay, 2016.

TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE HERITAGES IN THE DEBR

As representatives of the most important Christian institution in the land, the local Orthodox churches of Ethiopia frequently host objects of notable historical and cultural importance (Aymro, 1970, p. 33). Dekwa is the home to a large number of valuable religious objects. Many of the valuable objects are conserved and protected since the late 1940s (Gasirowski, 1981, p. 56). Some treasures before the mentioned period had been burned down and the rest moved to other places because of the Italian war (Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage, 2009). Moreover, in the early 1990s when chaos overwhelmed the country, lots of religious objects were looted by the local people (informant *melake miheret aba* Mulu Shitaneh). According to this informant, gold-made crown, sword that had used by the king, gold-made cross and other objects were looted at a time.

The cultural heritage of the church can be described by dividing them into tangible and intangible. Despite the trouble times the church passed through in terms of heritage preservation, the church contains a variety of tangible cultural treasures within its treasury house. They are found in a good condition as priests are aware of managing and protecting their sacred objects. Among the tangible cultural heritage found in the church includes are the *tabot* (Replica of the Arc of Covenant), liturgical objects, crosses, bells, ecclesiastical vestments and church musical instruments. Invaluable

documentary objects include manuscripts written in Ge'ez, some of which are illuminated.

Dekwa also preserves a large collection of *tabots*: more than five are said to be found in its Sanctuary (informant *Melake Mihret* Adane Abate). They are dedicated to Kidanemihret, St. George, St. Michael, Medaheniale and St. John. The *tabot* is usually wrapped with linen cloth and housed in *menber* and only priests are allowed to touch it. It is obvious that the value attached to this object is quite strong. The religious implication is awesome. Typically, the *tabot* is carried by priests during the celebration of *Timket* (Ethiopian Epiphany) and the annual commemoration of the church, on the month of *Yekatit 16*⁷ (informants *qes Fente Teshome*, *Dejene Shibabaw*). The festivals of the Virgin Mary are numerous in the context of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Budge, 2000, p. xvii). Contrary to the usual practice in other churches, in the *Debre Mehret* Dekwa Kidanemihret they carry a different *tabot* than the *tabot* dedicated to Kidanemihret during its annual festivity. Informants reason out that three people who were members of the church died immediately when they touched the *tabot* of Kidanemihret (*Melake Mihret aba Mulu Shitaneh*, *qes Mehret Woldemariam*). Thus, all devotees in the church keep themselves away from this particular *tabot* for fearing the consequences. Recently, those who are in charge of maintaining the church told me that they are too far from that particular site where the *tabot* is placed during their maintenance work (*ato Kelemu Eshetie*). The *tabot* is the one precious and the most sacred ecclesiastical object in every Ethiopian Orthodox church. It is one of the Judaic elements retained by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Schmidt, 1963, p. 54).

Traditionally, monasteries and churches have been the storehouses of manuscripts and archival documents. The libraries of ancient churches and monasteries located in Ethiopia have preserved large collections of important old manuscripts, most of them unique specimens (Belay, 1998, p. 32). *Debre Medahnit* Dekwa Kidanemihret is one of the above mentioned churches in which one can find significant number of documentary heritages. These documents are not only valuable for their artistic beauty and ecclesiastical works but also for their content, for they inform on historical issues, philosophy, and culture (Andrzejewski, et. al 1985, p. 203). They are valuable historical records and the source of information about our ancestors. Even though the manuscripts all over the countries were subject to natural deterioration and destruction, Dekwa is by far a better place for a safe storage of these documentary heritages irrespective of the status of these heritages, of which some are good and others are ruined. The lost documents are irreplaceable, any loss at present stage is final, and reconstruction is impossible. The loss of these documents in any reason would be disastrous. Even the loss of parts of a record from these collections for whatever cause is disastrous.

⁷ It is on the 16th that the monthly celebration of Kidanemihret falls in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church tradition. All the 30 days in a month are dedicated to different saints including St. Mary and Jesus himself. On these days, priests deliver religious services over the night.

Debre Medahnit Dekwa Kidanemihret also has impressive wall paintings and several illuminated manuscripts of the 17th Century. In the *Debre's* treasury house there are various collections of spiritual books written on parchments in Ge'ez. The church contains fair representation of almost all themes in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the manuscripts available in the church. Some of the more interesting manuscripts are the Holy Bible, New Testament, Miracles of Mary, the Faith of Fathers, liturgical books, hymnals, and prayer books.

Scholars of art history trace the beginning of the Second Gonderine style of painting to the last decade of the seventeenth century. The mural painting is observable over the main pillar of the church and the walls. Among the motives painted on the walls of Dekwa are popular ones such as Saint Mary and Saint Gebriel, which are dominant on the walls of the church. There are also paintings of Saint Abune Gebre Menfes Qiddus, the birth of the Christ, the Apostles during the Holy Supper and the Holy Trinity. As it is usual, the painter(s) are anonymous as until recently Ethiopian painters did not customarily sign their names to their work nor do their names appear in the historical records (Heldman, 1998, p. 2). It is to be noticed that these paintings are decaying and losing colour despite some maintenance so far. The fear is when repeated maintenance is made to these ancient paintings, which might lead to the loss of its originality (informant *qes* Worke Hailemariam).

ISSUES OF PRESERVATION

Cultural heritage is not eternal (ICCROM, 2006, p. 39). Its deterioration is an irreversible process that we can delay but not avoid completely. All materials comprising our cultural heritage are deteriorating as a result of physical, biological and/or chemical changes that occur over time (Ibid). The most common threats menacing this particular *Debr* are of natural and human origin. During the Italian invasion, the *Debr* and its material heritage has been affected as it had been in many other churches and monasteries in the region (informant *kesis* Kefyalew).

Natural factors that facilitate the deterioration of the *Debr* include geological, biological, climatic, hydrological factors and natural disasters. Among structural problems faced by the church are the fracturing and weathering which are observed in the external as well as internal walls and roof. The softy nature of the rock allows the passage of water through the cracks and fractures. Biological factors are also endangering the structure. For instance, a huge tree near the building is threatening it as the tree's roots have caused cracking. Besides, the surrounding trees, lichens and mosses also contribute to the damage. The tree also plays a significant role by providing habitat to animals like birds and rats. The dead bodies of the animals as well as plants themselves facilitate the growing search for water during the dry season.

According to UNESCO, the principal climatic factors responsible for the deterioration of both movable and immovable heritages are solar radiation, temperature variations, direct rainfall impact, wind pressure and humidity

(UNESCO, 1972). The resisting capacity of the rock together with the treasures in the *Debr* has decreased with age, the mismatching of the sacred objects component and the preservation area. Humidity is also another factor. These different factors are provoking the decay of various heritages within the church of Dekwa.



Figure 2: *Part of the roof of the meqdes*
Source: Photo Marshet Girmay, 2016.



Figure 3: *The church viewed from the south*
Source: Photo Marshet Girmay, 2016

CULTURAL HERITAGE AND MANAGEMENT

Ethiopia has one of the richest collections of sites, monuments and art objects in the whole of Africa, ranging from prehistoric sites to the recent historic period, which underlines the importance for comprehensive and effective legislation for the protection of her cultural heritage (Gasiorowski, 1981, p. 3). Though Ethiopia was not colonized, its structure of heritage management was established and enforced by western experts who followed their concepts of heritage conservation and management. During its colonial rule Italy endorsed some principles of heritage conservation (Ibid, p. 1). There was an initial effort to organize the safeguarding of ancient monuments in Ethiopia.

The Venice Charter of 1962 became the backbone of heritage conservation in many countries (Kifle, 1994, p. 23). In Ethiopia, during the pre 1966 period, it was the *Fetha Negest* that discharged its responsibility in the management process of cultural heritages (Paulos, 1968, p. 21). In the modern sense, Proclamation No. 229 of 1966 was the first act of legislation creating the basis for safeguarding the cultural heritage by the state (Negarit Gazeta, No. 229, 1966). This was of course derived from the 1955 Constitution of the country. Following the 1955 Constitution, fragmented legislations namely the Penal Code (1957) and the Civil Code (1960) articulated the need and preservation of cultural heritages in Ethiopia and narrated the consequences for those who transgressed the law. Moreover, the year 1966 is a remarkable period as far as heritage management is concerned for the subject is institutionalized despite the limitations enclosed (Solomon, 2010, p. 49). This institution was engaged in the preservation, protection, research and promotion activities concerning on the cultural heritages in Ethiopia. In the 1970s the World Heritage Convention emerged and boldly emphasized the authenticity of the heritage. This newly-born concept of the 1970s gradually forced heritage professionals to revisit their heritage conservation and management praxis in their respective countries and to move away from their fabric-based conservation strategies, which cannot work in all cases. So as to find a practical context-based heritage conservation framework, the need to explore the current trends of heritage conservation and management became mandatory (Tunprawat, 2009, p. 89). Therefore, Ethiopia, based on the recommendation given by UNESCO in 1989, was forced to develop new heritage regulations in line with the UNESCO documents (Gasiorowski, 1981, p.67).

One of the major problems of churches in relation to heritage management is the definition given to “antiquities” under the heritage legislation document of 1966 (Ibid). There is also a question of ownership. According to the Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage Proclamation No. 209/2000, Cultural heritage may be owned by the state or by individuals. The proclamation also classified cultural heritage at national and regional level. However, there is a conflict when this proclamation comes to the church to work. Religious heritages are quite different from other types of heritages in the sense that they have spirituality attachment which can even be touched only by those who are “allowed’ (Nolan & Nolan, 1992, p.

119). Believers of the specific religion claim that religious heritages should be kept within the church because they serve for religious purpose and are undeserved to outsiders who might defame their spirituality (Orbasli & Woodward, 2010, p. 5). Thus, there is dilemma regarding to the possession and managing of religious heritages between ecclesiastical and secular authorities. It can be argued that present problems encountered by religious heritages such as looting, illicit trafficking, vandalism, trespassing, ignorance and neglect have all stemmed from the fading sense of heritage ownership of local communities. As argued by Tunprawat many problems affecting religious heritages today emanate from the unsuccessful communication between heritage professionals and the public (2009, p. 100).

Uhlig (1983) describes tens of thousands of churches and monasteries throughout the country, mainly in the northern parts of Ethiopia. These churches hold important collections of manuscripts, the extent of which have not yet been established. Sacredness is the inherited value that makes religious heritage different from other types of heritages. For millennia, sacred places and religious celebrations have attracted worshipers. More than half of the world heritages registered under UNESCO are religious ones (Sacred Destinations, 2011). The religious heritage is preserved for the faithful to practice, but the same heritage, considered as cultural heritage or other heritages, within a national system for conservation for the public at large to enjoy. Inevitably, the aims of the two groups in managing the respective heritages cannot be similar in any time because the aims usually emanate from the meaning and the value attached to the heritage.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND HERITAGE PRESERVATION TECHNIQUES IN THE DEBR

Debre Medahnit Dekwa Kidanemihret has been neglected for a long time. Until now public authorities or institutions have done little in order to preserve the church and its objects from decay and destruction. An exception was a religious congress organized by the religious institution Mahbere Kidusan in 2016 and also the financial grant (100,000.00 ETB) by the North Gondar Culture and Tourism Department for the underway maintenance. The congress was held at the *Debre Medahnit* Dekwa Kidanemihret for two days and it saw the participation of guests from different levels.

Yet, throughout centuries this *Debr* has enforced its own management techniques that have enabled several objects to survive over several hundreds of years. Even during the time of hardship when different factors threatened the church, the church had enforced its own methods in order to keep its heritages safe from damage (informant *qes* Worke Woldemariam, *qes* Fente Teshome, *qes* Qeleme Tashu, and *qes* Petros Manegerew). The primal conservation technique used was the assignment of indigenous guardians which was highly crucial for the sustenance of religious heritages. In particular the clergy who has won the support of the faithful and who have the trust from the church because of their spiritual achievements have been responsible for the management process. The church also resorted to declaring “weeks of fasting” throughout which they selected a man to be appointed as the head of *ika bet*, small building where religious heritages are

stored. The divine power is believed to have indicated the “right” person. Typically the candidate chosen is one who has not been involved in the church management and he may even be from a different monastery. After the chosen person is being notified he comes and falls down in front of the group of priests or may be monks during “*tselote me’ad*”.⁸ Then, a group of prayers make “*tselote mariam*” which is fully dedicated to this person by frequently mentioning his name. This person will then remain in charge of the *ika bet* as long as he is good enough in health (informant *liqe liqawint Ezira*). My informants interestingly note that this man is also responsible to take manuscripts in the open air and take care of the storage environment intermittently to prevent from decay by natural causes because they are liable to rot otherwise.

Ika bet can be a small building built inside the church yard or it can be a hidden storage inside the wall of the church. They dig out the wall to some distance and make a kind of cover which resembles the rest of the wall. Sometimes it is found in the roof which could be too far from the ground. In the study church, the *tabot* of Kidanemihret is stored somewhere in the roof and is inaccessible. This is because they value religious heritages in terms of religion, ethics, philosophy, aesthetics and culture. Religious objects, including *saten*, *albasat* or clothes and other smaller religious objects, are stored in the locally made rectangular wooden box at the *ika bet*.

During the time of political crisis in Ethiopia, informants noted that, local *balabats* were in charge of managing religious objects at home. Many valuable religious objects had been given to the local *balabats*, who were exemplary in their spirituality, with the full consent of the local community for better protection. The local *balabats* had won the support of the local community because they had, relatively speaking, more than enough individual property and were accustomed to support the needy in the surrounding in addition to their spiritual maturity. Thus, they were simply icons of that particular community. In return, the local community had given free labour service on the *balabats’* farm. This could be possible only for some selective religious objects. There are some others which could not be even touched by any lay man. However, objects in the church like umbrellas in different forms and sizes, and church musical instruments were legible to be handed to the *balabats*. The stronger reason for this was that they have had much trust and respect from the community as far as religious heritages concerned. They are believed to be responsible and committed to their religion (informant *qes Worke Hailemariam*).

In early times, guardians of the church also used their own “traditional” storage techniques in order to preserve and save the documents from man-made and natural disasters. For instance, they used to wrap the manuscripts with leather or clothes and hang them by a strap with books on walls. Primarily, the manuscript binding tradition is quite interesting which hugely contribute to its duration. Its resistance against natural hazards is quite good as well. According to Sergew (1981: 21), in the Ethiopian book

⁸ *Tselote me’ad* is a praying session when monks and priests come together for some special occasion usually concluded at 3:00 pm.

making tradition the cover of manuscripts are usually wooden and rarely leather. Even, the types of woods used for cover were selected in terms of the quality to resist decaying and other hazards caused by insects. Lightness and its simplicity to curve for the purpose were also the other criteria to select the wood (informant *qes Fente Teshome*). Skins from all types of animals also tanned for book covers for different purposes. However, only some animals' skin is curiously used for religious manuscripts preparation and for the cover. Those animals considered as unclean from religious point of view could not be used. It is the skin of goat usually used for the manuscript. The reason is because it is stronger and cheaper than sheep's skin and others.

The tradition of manuscript binding technique goes back as far as to the fifteenth century in Ethiopia (Sergew, 1981: 26). The choice of using the type of skin depends on the size and character of the manuscript for the cover purpose (Uhlig, 2007). If the manuscript is psalm which is smaller in size they usually prefer to use the skin from the goat and if it is for a big manuscript like *Senkesar*⁹ they prefer the skin of cow. Sheep symbolizes naivety in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church teaching and is positively accepted. On the other hand, goat symbolizes sinner (informant *qes Fente Teshome*). Yet, it does not have any problem using their skins. No one can notice one manuscript which bears decorations on the surface of the boards because the purpose is to prevent the manuscript from easy damage. Thus, they remain blank and simple. Those which are often demanded for religious services are usually lined with a coloured cloth. According to the tradition in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, a religious manuscript should not be left uncovered. Therefore, those manuscripts that are covered in leather or wood are equipped with external cloth covers. If it had been uncovered in leather or wood, it could not have been preserved better for they are found scattered and nearly dumped. However, not all manuscripts are covered in leather or wood in the study church.

In the northern parts of Ethiopia, there are various types of land tenure. The land granted to the church and to those who serve the church is called *semon meret*.¹⁰ The church had *siso meret* 1/3 of the total land belongs to the Ethiopian people. There are written documents witnessing the granting of land to churches and monasteries during the Gonderine period (Crummey, 2011, p. 3). In addition, *ye'amora t'ebaqi meret*, literally "bird-watcher's land", is a plot of land handed to a person (*yemora t'ebaqi*) who was in charge of the protection of the church from the waste and damage caused by birds. In most churches and monasteries, the sacred tree grove is the home to several bird species. The Amharic term of *amora* refers to a group of birds. In the Ethiopian Christian tradition, the crow, a black bird having a raucous call, is considered as possessing an evil spirit owing to the cultural association of black with something unpleasant. For instance, the sixteenth-century chronicle on the Muslim-Christian war documented that the church of Debre Asbo, later known as Debre Libanos, was set on fire. Arab Faqqih, the Yemeni chronicler of Ahmed Gragn's campaign, tells

⁹. The book of the daily Saints for the entire year and explaining the origin and the meaning of feast.

that the Muslim Jihadists were angered when the church resisted the fire. They finally tried to render it impure by shading the walls with the dirt of crows and vultures (Lester, 2003, p. 125).

In Ethiopian Christian society vultures and eagles are treated as unclean, for the reason that they feed on leftovers from dead animals. It occurs sometimes that such animals bring pieces of their captured carrion to the church yard. In opposition, the white dove is an emblem of peace and as such it is welcomed in various structures of the church yard. The dove is also the symbol of the Holy Spirit and means by which people could be redeemed and ascend to heaven. Yet, any kinds of birds are prevented from finding a shelter in the *qiddist* (holy of holies), the innermost and sacred partition in both the rectangular and circular church architecture. Thus, the role of the bird watcher is to keep birds, mainly crows and vultures, the consumers of leftovers, away from the church compound and to prevent the doves from entering the sacred partitions of the church. He is therefore responsible to maintain the sacred and cleanliness of the church and its holy objects (informant *kesis* Kefyalew).

The church's material culture is also protected by another office, that of *yedemet kordaj meret*. This land is given to those who look after the cats that shall protect the religious objects from being destroyed by rats. In popular belief, both from a symbolic and a practical point of view, rats are believed to be devil. The rat's presence invites the serpent, which in biblical tradition is the most devilish creature. In addition, it is well known that rats can provoke massive damage to food, objects and material culture. Hence, the duty of *yedemet kordaj* is to watch over the collections in the church from damage by rats and to make sure these animals are consumed by the cat. Unlike the birds *amora* and dogs, cats are accepted in churches and with the graceful monkeys they are often the only animals allowed in church compounds (see Rouaud, 2004). It is believed that the cat cannot desecrate sacred church materials. Thus, churches assign people to raise and take care of cats in the church.

Traditional and modern manuscript collections in Ethiopia have suffered throughout times the effects of war and human-caused destruction. As a result of it churches and monasteries, during troubled times, have resorted to preserving documents by collecting and keeping them in remote and inaccessible locations. In Dekwa Kidanemihret such a practice has been enforced. Responsible churchmen are typically mistrustful of strangers and are aware that the prospect of an uncertain future could bring similar hazards against church materials. Therefore, they have a different and inaccessible place where all valuable church materials are kept and preserved.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is obvious that the indigenous heritage conservation and management techniques enforced by Dekwa Kidanemihret, as well as by most of the churches of the Gondar region, are today unable to meet the professional

¹⁰. *Semon* is the Ge'ez word for eight days; Gebre-Wold Ingida-Worq, 1962, p. 309.

principles in conserving and managing religious heritage. The safeguarding of cultural heritage requires serious professional skills of which most churches are lacking (ICCRUM, 2006, p. 49). Because in a religious setting religious heritages are sacred by nature, people have a unique emotional attachment to them and this provokes conflicts with government officials working on culture and tourism offices. Churches and monasteries often apply a “close door” policy with regard to heritages hosted within their premises. Thus, the man in charge of the *ika bet* is typically unwilling to show church properties for anyone irrespective of the latter’s religious or political affiliation, except for those who are assigned to manage it. Churchmen explain this attitude with a lack of trust which was the result of previous negative experiences (informant *kesis* Kefyalew).

At the *Debre Medahnit* Dekwa Kidanemihret local management practices have been crucial to preserve the institution’s valuable goods. Yet, it is obvious that today these are not sufficient to prevent further damage to the church’s structure as well as to its objects. New management techniques should be put in force. Trenches and drainage systems, for instance, should be cleaned to minimize the amount of infiltration of water. To reduce the impact of rainfall, sunshine, and biological colonization it is good to cut the trees on the acme of the church with special attention to protect those tree species endangered from extinction.

Conservation work should be based on a well planned and organized approach and multidisciplinary study should be conducted. The indigenous preservation method in the church should be backed by a scientific approach. In addition, promotion work should be properly carried out. The Culture and Tourism Offices and the Church should inform visitors, researchers as well as the concerned bodies by using various mechanisms of promotion such as, magazines, newspapers, and radio. Such activities could pave the way for the proper study and documentation of the church’s heritage as well as for providing up-to-date and reliable information for visitors.

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LIST OF INFORMANTS

Name	Age	Date of Inter-view	Place	Remarks
<i>qesis</i> Ale-mayehu	56	January 15/2016	Woken	A priest in Dekwa Kidanemihret church who is entitled to preach gospel in various churches
<i>qes</i> Aklilu Desse	61	January 15/2016	Woken	A priest in Dekwa Kidanemihret church.
<i>qes</i> Fente Teshome	57	January 15/2016	Dabat	Formerly he was head of Debre Genet St. George church in Dabat town. Now he works as the head of the North Gonder Diocese Ecclesiastical Office, Dabat Branch.
<i>ato</i> Dejene Shibabaw	66	March 2/2016	Woken	A priest in Dekwa Kidanemihret church
<i>qes</i> Mihret Wolde Mariam	55	November 10/2016	Gondar	A priest in Dekwa Kidanemihret and working as a member of the fund raising committee who is in charge of the maintenance of Debre Medahnit Dekwa Kidanemihret.
<i>melake mihret abba</i> Mulu Shitaneh	80	November 10/2016	Gondar	A well respected monk in the community who played the leading role in the establishment of many churches in Gondar and the surrounding, namely the church of Saint Gabriel in Gondar town kebele 14. And, he is also the chair person of the fund raising committee who is in charge of the maintenance of Debre Medahnit Dekwa Kidanemihret.
<i>qes</i> Worke Haile-mariam	71	March 2/2016	Dabat	Formerly he was the chairman of the Council of churches in the Woreda. He is a native of Woken. He has good knowledge on the history of the church and the land tenure systems.
<i>qes</i> Qeleme Tashu	77	February 12/2016	Abtera	Until very recently he was the head of St. Michael church in Abtera. He is a well known religious scholar. He knows and has read many of the manuscripts with historical information at the various churches and monasteries of North Gondar. Currently he is devoted to teaching his spiritual children.
<i>melake mihret</i> Adane Abate	76	March 2/2016	Dekwa	Head of Dekwa Kidanemihret church
<i>liqe liqaw-int</i> Ezera	67	January 30/2016	Gonder	Head of the church of Medahonialem and the four great church schools in Gondar town. He is a "professor" of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and is called 'Four Eyes'. His knowledge about the church and the various manuscripts in the church is remarkable.