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## CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGES AND POTENTIAL TOURIST ROUTE OF ASTBI WENBERTA AND OFFLA WEREDAS IN ETHIOPIA

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**Abstract:** *Atsbi Wenberta and Offla Weredas's cultural landscapes are of National, Regional and Local significance because of its rich combination of attributes of historical and cultural heritage, archaeological, social and natural significance. This cultural landscape encompasses values such as biodiversity, scenic beauty, culture, history and more importantly identity. Despite having such value, the heritages studied in this research are not integrated in the economic development of the community. This research has recommended ways in which heritage resources contribute to the local economy through better management of heritage resource and promotion of potential new tourist route. The promotion of potential new tourist route has been identified as a key scheme that can lead to economic uplifting, community base development, poverty relief and link peoples in countries like Ethiopia.*

**Keywords:** *cultural heritage, heritage resource, tourist route, poverty relief, scenic beauty*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In an era of holistic and integrative thinking, the potential of culture and heritage as both elements and tools for socio-economic development has been gaining the attention and imagination of scholars and policy makers worldwide. The concept of heritage is evolving as a result of and according to the changing attitudes, needs and demands people convey towards it. There is a clear move toward a people-centred, functional approach in regards to heritage, simultaneously shifting its focus along three interrelated axes: from monuments to people, from objects to functions and consequently from preservation to sustainable use and development (IDEAS Reports).



This shift in how heritage is perceived, calls for integrated heritage management, emphasizing that every historic area and its surroundings should be considered in its totality as a coherent whole whose balance and specific nature depend on the fusion of the parts, which include human activities as much as the buildings, spatial organization and surroundings. Thus, the very notion of conservation has drastically changed from preservation to sustainable use and management of change in both the cultural and natural environment. This new approach has led to a shift in emphasis in heritage conservation for example from the conservation of a discreet heritage monument in isolation to the sustainable management of towns, cities and landscapes as a whole (IDEAS Reports)

Following this trend, scholars from mainly Addis Ababa University has been embarking in study that both combine identification and exploration of heritage sites along with development of provisions in which those heritage can be integrated to the development activities. These scholars while studying the heritage sites, they did not study them in isolation from their environment but through applying multidisciplinary approach they tried to identify the heritage resources along with their environmental and socio-cultural context (Mulugeta et al, 2010).

The area identified for this research, Astbi Wenberta and Offla *Weredas* found in Eastern and Southern Tigray Region respectively are potential areas for the above mentioned research type as they are rich in both cultural and natural heritage sites for possible developing integrative heritage based development. One way to integrate heritage to development is to develop heritage based tourism by integrating and aligning tourist route through identified heritage site.

This research proposes the development of tourist in two *Weredas* that is Astbi Wemberta *Wereda* in Eastern Tigray and Offla *Wereda* in the Southern Tigray. It is done through documenting and assigning values to heritage sites as to integrating and aligning along proposed potential tourist route.

Tigray region in Northern Ethiopia has large number of historical heritages, dating back more than 2500 BP that includes monolithic obelisks, giant stele, royal tombs, cathedral and the ruins of ancient castles as well as natural heritages such as forest areas as well fantastic



natural landscapes. It is the place where it is believed Ethiopia was born and where much of the country's early history took place.

Tigray region more specifically *Weredas* such as Atsbi Wenberta and Offla found in East, Southern Tigray are particular blessed with man and natural made heritages that have cultural, economic and historic values. These heritages need proper surveying and documenting for the sake to use these heritages for the benefit of our country thereby integrating these heritages to development.

Previous researches and publications have documented natural and cultural heritages found in both *Weredas*. According to Zenebe Gebreegziabher (1999) in Atsbi Wenberta among the *Wereda's* natural heritage attraction is the famous Dessa'a Protected Area where we find one of the few remaining forest in Tigray. Delineated and demarcated in 1993 as one of the 59 national forest priority areas, Dessa'a Protected Area contains large concentration of indigenous plant in the region. The wildlife fauna population although significantly reduced as result of human activities, we still found twenty species of mammals, thirteen species of birds and one species of reptiles in the area (Zenebe Gebreegziabher 1999). Claude Lepage and Jacques Mercier (1997) described and documented the *Weredas* numerous number of historical cultural heritages whereby many of the oldest rock hewn churches such as Zarema, Debre Selam and Gazien which were built in the period of 7<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century are found there. (Claude Lepage and Jacques Mercier 1997).

Many publications, websites and journals also give description of many of Offla's rich natural and cultural heritage. "Websites for Bird Watching Enthusiast" have identified the Hungumburda and Grah Kahsu mountain forest landscape with the total area 40,000 hectares and 1900 to 3000 above sea level to have 58 birds species whereby of which 12 are Afro tropical species including the endemic Abyssinia Cut Bird. Lake Hashenge and its surroundings are also recognized as an important Bird Sanctuary Area. In terms of cultural heritage, Tekle (2004) has excavated and documented on the lake shore a mysterious archaeological ruin from unknown period.

While the above mentioned research provide information on specific heritage resource, few dealt or articulated how those research can be integrated to development of the region so that they can benefit the local community who are the owners of the heritage resources. Few of the literatures also mention that they are varieties of heritage found nearby with the



one they mention. This research will first identify and describe all the different heritage resources found in the two *Weredas*, and will outline ways to integrate those heritages to development by drawing tourist

## 2. CULTURAL AND NATURAL RESOURCES

According to the definition set out in the World Heritage Convention a Cultural Landscape includes the combined works of nature and humankind expressed through a long and intimate relationship between people and the surrounding natural environment. The World Heritage Committee has identified and adopted three categories of cultural landscape, ranging from those landscapes that are deliberately 'shaped' by people, to landscape shaped by the combination of both people and nature and those least evidently 'shaped' by people and given high social value.

The three categories based on the Committee's Operational Guidelines, are as follows:

- A) Landscape designed and created intentionally by man;
- B) Naturally evolved landscape which may be a relict (or fossil) landscape or a continuing landscape and
- C) Associative cultural landscape which may be valued because of the religious, artistic or cultural associations of the natural element.

Cultural and natural heritage significance means aesthetic, archaeological, architectural, cultural, historical, scientific or social significance for past, present or future generations (Heritage Act 1995, Burra Charter 1999). Examples of how these values apply to Cultural Landscapes are as follows:-

- i. **Aesthetic significance** accommodates all the sensory values of the place (but privileges the visual especially) and is often encapsulated in architectural terms, such as through a particular style. When applying Aesthetic significance to landscape, it includes views and vistas, sounds and smells, form and layout and groupings of and relations between different elements. A designed landscape such as a garden may be of aesthetic significance for its design qualities in terms of layout and design styles, plant specimens, and structural and built elements. An organically evolved landscape or associative landscape may have aesthetic value for its scenic beauty.



- ii. **Archaeological** significance includes landscapes with post-contact archaeological remains and their relevant setting; the latter may also have heritage value, or may be included to ensure protection of the archaeological material
- iii. **Architectural** significance in landscape terms, will typically relate to built structures and their style, but very often is also relevant to their landscape setting to which the design may respond. e.g. the waterway and topography which provides the context to a mill or similar industrial structure; or, the landscape setting, position and views to and from a house built in the 'picturesque' manner; also statues, memorials and sculptures.
- iv. **Historical** significance relates to the value of a place's association with important historical events, eras or individuals, people. Historic value 'underlies' aesthetic, social and scientific value. (Eg. Adwa Mountain, Endayesus Mountain)
- v. **Scientific** significance relates to the technical achievements associated with a place, or for its educational potential. Generally, scientific significance may relate to a variety of places, from industrial sites such as mines to bridges or dams. Botanical value and environmental value, geological and geomorphological values are typically thought of as 'natural' values, and would be considered only where an association would also be culturally significant.
- vi. **Social value** may include places of significance to groups and communities, especially through use.

What we found in Atsbi Wenberta and Offla *Weredas* is a cultural landscape where we see the cultural, social, historical and natural assemblage are very much intertwined with the above mentioned values. The study areas are endowed with natural and cultural heritage resources and the study by focusing on the cultural landscape put together the heritage resources in an integrated approach "combining works of nature and of man"

### 3. ASTBI WENBERTA WEREDA CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

The *Wereda* is endowed with its rich cultural landscape that include historically very significant churches and monasteries as well as, archaeological sites dating back pre-Christian period in Ethiopian history. The churches, monasteries and archaeological sites in the *Wereda* are living testimonies of the evolution of the society and their settlement overtime, under the influence of the physical constraint and opportunities presented by



their natural landscape and their successive social, economic and cultural forces. These forces have enabled the society to develop remarkable, sustainable and environmentally friendly way of life. This way of life can be demonstrated through the strong social cohesion, belongingness and identity.

### 3.1 Astbi Churches and Monasteries

Astbi Wenberta *Wereda* is at the epicentre of the cluster of important rock-hewn and Axumite churches (Bradat). The district consists of a characteristically attractive Tigranian assemblage of traditional stone house situated at an altitude of around 2,500 m at the plateau. Moreover, it was one of the main routes for the ancient salt trader caravan from the Tigrean highland to the Afar lowland where the salt deposit is found. Even today the *Wereda* is the host of the modern road that transit between Wukro and Danakil-Desert.

As result of the above mentioned activities, many of the churches along the ancient caravan route are dedicated to the Archangel Michel. The highlander salt traders believed that by dedicating the churches to the Archangel Michel, they would get better protection from natural hazards, as well as from any social conflicts such as banditry during their journey.

The *Wereda* has a number of built and rock hewn types churches. For this research, the churches and monasteries are grouped in the following categories geographical distributions making Atsbi town as reference:-

- North of Atsbi Town
- South of Atsbi Town,

### 3.2 Cherkos Agebo

This rock hewn church, constructed around 537 AD by *Atse* Gebre Meskel is located at N 13° 57' 02.1" and E 039° 46' 02.9" at an elevation of 2880 m a.s.l. the interior of this church (the "Mekdes") is carved out of sandstone unit and the outer compartment is constructed of a masonry wall made of thin blocks of iron cemented sandstone reinforced with trunks of indigenous "tsed" tree (See photo below).

The church looking from N to S, built inside a massive sandstone shelter This church is constructed in a natural shelter on the rim of the cliff forming sandstone. The sandstone in the area is massive, up to 150m thick from bottom to top, and uniform in composition throughout.



**Photo 1: Cherkos Agobo**

On top of the exposure, there is an iron cemented unit up to 2m thick. This highly iron rich bed acts as a cap in protecting the rest of underlying less resistant units from erosion by running water. The sandstone bed, though capped by resistant iron cemented unit on top, is relatively less resistant for erosion by the high energy flood water on the steep slope morphology. Hence, the differential erosion resulted in the natural shelter where Cherkos Agebo and other similar rock hewn churches were made in.

### **3.3 Zarema Debre Berhan Giorgis**

The church is situated about 14 km from Atsbi town to North West direction and, West of Debre Selam Michael church at GPS coordinate 0572821N, 1540784E and at altitude of 2836 m above sea level. It has been covered by recently erected building. The church is the only one in the country having a plan with two apses, on the eastern and western sides, an extremely rare feature in the whole of Christian architecture. Just like the central nave the upper parts of these apses have false windows with finally carved wooden panels

The church with rectangular ground and cultural ceiling is made up of large block of stone intervened by fine woods. Moreover a disc and crescent symbols are depicted on the roof of the church. The access to the chamber where the *Tabot* is housed has its sides fixed with



incised boards. Its fine wooden ceiling is supported by hewn pillars. Its architectural setting is so striking.



**Photo 2: Interior parts of Zarema Giorgis from the book of Ethiopian Art**

According to Ruth plant, the relic of the above built church came in to being something's after the construction of Debre Damo Monastery and before the start of hewing rock churches. On the other hand, according to the local tradition, the church was established between in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century.

### **3.4 Maryam Aba'o**

The church is found some 15 km to the Northern direction from Atsbi town or 3 km East from Dera village. Local tradition says that the church has long history. According to the local oral history, the date of the church establishment goes back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD during the reign of the twin kings of Abrha and Atsbha.

The church building is divided into two whereby the inner part which is a rock hewn, is estimated to cover an area of 6 by 15 m<sup>2</sup>; while the size of the area of the outer part which is built up section is 7 by 10 m<sup>2</sup>. The inside of the church is similar with that of Michael Debre Selam and Cherqos Agebo. According to the local informant, the external part used to be rock hewn and much narrower than the present structure. However during the *Zemene Mesafint* (1769 -1855), it has been demolished to make way for more spacious masonry building that is still standing at the present.

### **3.5 Maryam Wukro (Dera)**

The church is located to the Eastern side of escarpment at GPS 0577628N, 1549915E and at 3011 m above sea level. The rock hewn church is entered through the eastern side of the

gate that is protected by stone wall. This church is built in a cave whereby the temple is fully constructed from the rock of the cave, while the Kidst and the Qene Mahlet are partially made of the cave rock and partially built from rock masonry. According to the local sources, the front side of the church was built by Dejjach Hailu Ygzaw around 1948. The church is situated at high elevation and accessible from the ground with stairs. According to the local informant, the history of the church goes back to the 6th during the Aksumite period. But according to Tekle Hagos, the church dates to the medieval times.



**Photo 3: Picture from the Front of Maryam Wukro (Dera)**

According to the local informant the church wall is decorated with painting depicting images of history from the Old and New Testament. The local informant also stated that Maryam Wukro (Dera) is endowed with many parchment books and other treasures.

### **3.6 Michael Mtswae Church (Zahrar)**

Michael Mtswae is located 5 km to the North East of the town of Atsbi in Felegeweni administrative at 0582078N, 1534680E and the elevation of 2786m above the sea level. It is situated on sedimentary cliff facing towards west to the town of Astbi and plain and river of Ayadim. It takes 15 minute walk to climb the steep cliff.

The church of Michael Mtswae is surrounded by rock; while its entrance is masonry plastering with mud and limestone. The stonewall gate of the church is found on the west direction. The interior of the church is large one and is curved from limestone. Two unfinished carved windows are found to the south of the main church facing to the west. There are large number of human skeleton and skull found on the edge of limestone caves to the north of this rock hewn church. They are kept on wooden coffins that are rectangular in shape.



It is interesting to visit it because it is located on the edge of the salt trade route and to the salt mining place in Afar Regional State.

### 3.6 Gabriel Zalabay

It is located to the North of the town of Atsbi on the way leading to the town of Edaga Hamus at 0577545N, 154968E and at elevation of 3012 m above sea level. It is situated on sedimentary cliff on top of Eastern escarpment and is 20 minute walk to climb.

It is entered through the Southern side where there are many sedimentary caves and were the church was initially built. This caved were protected by stone walls. These walls are abandoned and ruined.

The church of Gabriel Zalabay is located about 100 meters to the west side of the cave. The gate of this cave church is protected by stonewall. Human skull and skeletons are found on the eastern side of the church.

### 3.7 Churches/Monasteries Found to the South of Atsbi

To the South of Atsbi town, there are rocks hewn as well as built churches/ monasteries.

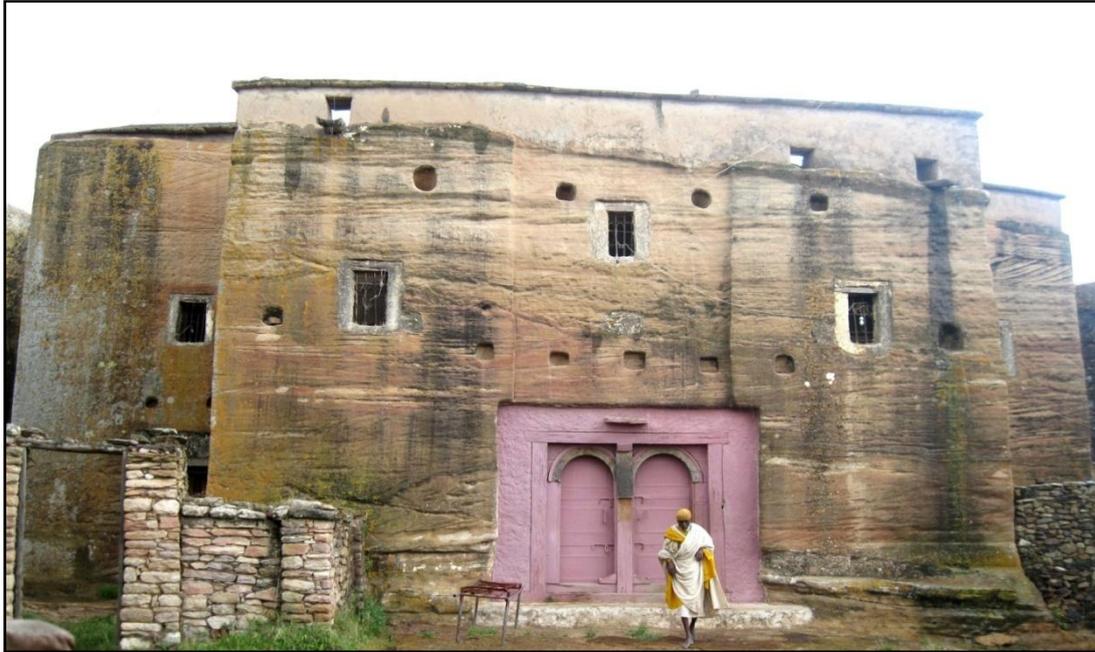
**Table 1: Heritage Resource of Southern Atsbi**

No.	Name of the Church/ Monastery	Built	Rock Hewn
1	Michael Imba		✓
2	Mickael Barka		✓
3	The Monastery of Dibo Maryam.	✓	
4	The Monastery of Maryam Asira Metira	✓	

### 3.8 Mikael Imba Church

Found at 19 km NE of Haik Meshl town (SE of Atsbi). The road to this church passes through a ragged topography. The church is situated at N 13° 45' 54.2" and E 039° 45' 49.9", 2531m a.s.l on top of a steep cliff which is the left embankment of a wide river valley setting. The church entrance starts with long concrete stairs and two ladders lead to the top of the cliff where the church is situated.

This church, unlike the others, is big and carved out of a single massive sandstone rock intercalated with thin layers of mud/silt stones. The thinly bedded sandstone is highly cross bedded at high angle, which provided unique structural beauty to the inside of the church (See photo below).



**Photo 4: front view of Mikael Imba church (top) and inside of the rock hewn church beautified by colored cross-bedded sandstone (bottom)**

### **3.9 Michael Barka**

Rock hewn churches, located at about 6 km to South-Western direction of Atsbi town and 18 km North-Eastern direction from the town of Wukro. It is situated on a hill overlooking the Atsbi-Wukro road. As result it is the most easily accessible church by car.

Mickael Barka church is carved out from the top of an isolated roughly round rock hill. One can easily reach the top of the hill, after walking less than 15 minutes. **Monastery of Maryam Dibo**

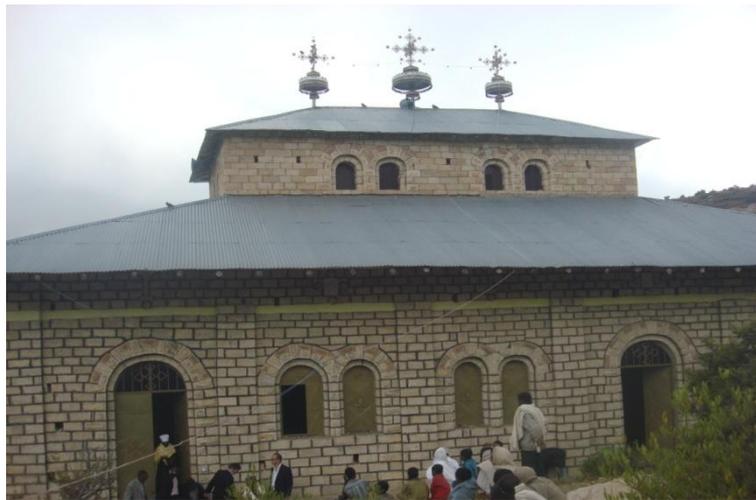
The Monastery is found at 12 km South-Eastern of Atsbi town. It lies at the border area of Tigray Regional State with Afar Regional State, near to the Afar Depression. Its GPS location is 0582805N, 1538686E and 2901m above sea level. According to the local sources, it was founded in 615 E.C by Atse Kaleb, and later was reorganized by his son Atse Gebre Meskel in 637 AD.

Monastery of Maryam Dibo has been serving as a Monastery where there is strong church education. Its monastic life is very active whereby today more than 70 monks still live around the monastery. Its remoteness from urban centre and its forest coverage make the place suitable for monastic and spiritual life. The monks support themselves by producing clothes engaging in agricultural activities including animal husbandry and bee farming.



### 3.10 Monastery of Maryam Asira Metira

The Monastery is located 10 km South-East of Atsbi town. Like the Monastery of Maryam Dibo, Maryam Asira Metira has a long history. According to the local sources, the Monastery was established in 6<sup>th</sup> century AD and was very much active up until the end of the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. However, the Monastery was forced to stop its spiritual and social services for years, because of the war and instability that occurred in the area. It was only after 2004 that the Monastery has become again active as a place of major monastic life as well centre of church education in the area.



**Photo 5: The new main church of Monastery of Maryam Asira Metira**

As any other monastery, the major responsibility of the Monastery of Maryam Asira Metira is that of maintaining monastic life and spiritual activities. However, this monastery tries to solve the socio-economic problems of monks and local communities by engaging in various developmental activities such as engaging in modern agriculture, handicraft education, bee farming in order to eradicate poverty in the locality. It is also engaged in economical support of the community's vulnerable members such as the elderly and the orphans.

## 4. ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES IN ASTBI WENBERTA

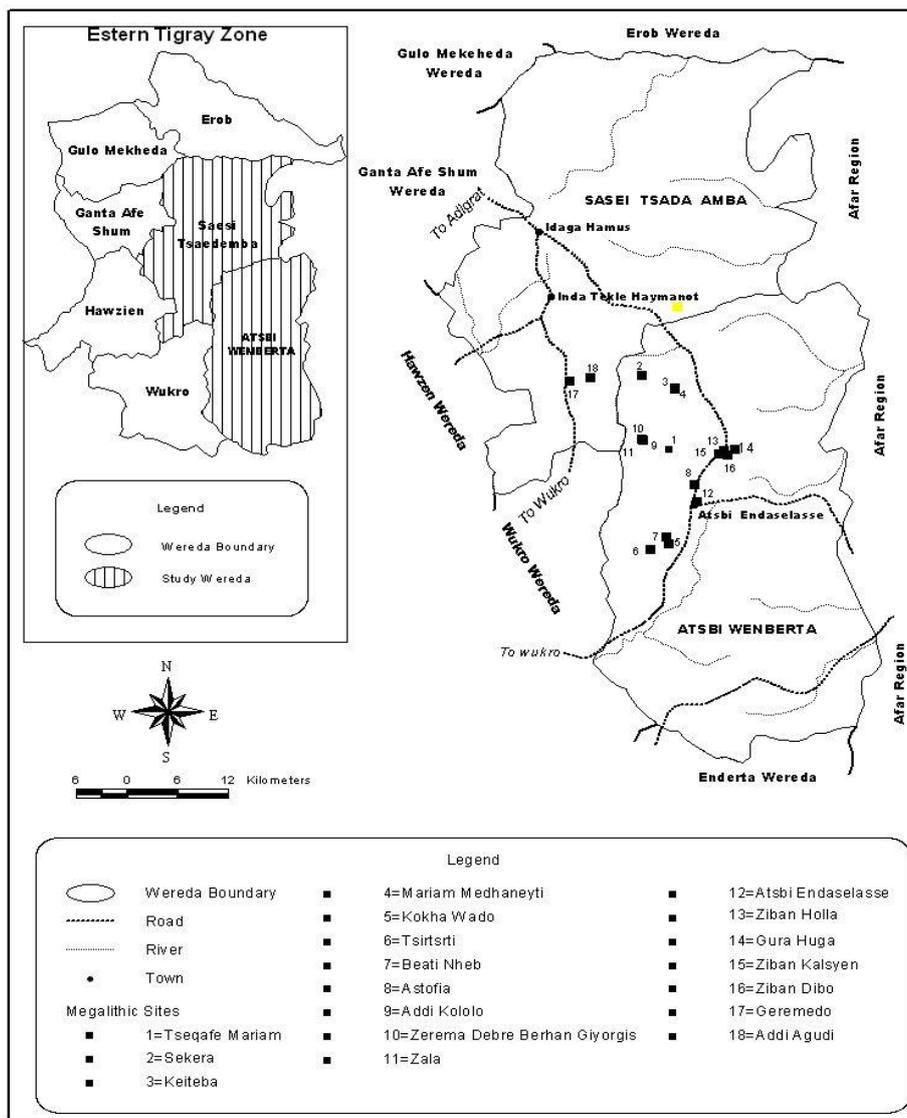
Until recently, it was not known about the presence of archaeological site in Atsbi Wemberta *Wereda* (Tekle 2007, Yohannes 2008). The presence of megaliths in this part of Tigray was hardly known until 2004, when in 2004 a team from the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCH) and Tigray Culture and Information Bureau undertook a field survey in Eastern Tigray including the district of Atsbi Wemberta and its



environs. T number of archaeological sites which included stelae, tumuli, cave churches and other archaeological findings (Tekle 2007, Yohannes 2008).

According to Yohannes 2008, there are eighteen megalithic sites and thirty three individual megaliths located in Atsbi Wemberta *Wereda* and its environs. Except two stelae sites that are found in Saesie Tsaedaemba *Wereda* all are located within Atsbi Wemberta *Wereda*. The largest concentrations of megalithic sites are found on the western half of Atsbi Wemberta *Wereda* and areas adjacent to this side (see map below).

**Fig 1:-** Map Showing Megalithic Archaeological Sites in Research Area



The steles found in the Atsbi Wemberta *Wereda* are categorized as undressed, meaning no human attempt to carve or shape the steles; roughly dressing meaning slight shaping by human and dressed meaning serious shaping and carving of the stele surface. Accordingly



steles found at Afenegew Mariam site are undressed while those found at Mariam Medhaneyte, Beati Nheb, Astofia, Zala, Zarema Debere Berhan and Addi Agudi site are mainly roughly dressed. Well dressed steles are found at the Sekera site, Mariam Medhaneyte, Kokha Wado, Tsirtsrti, Addi Kololo and Atsbi Endasselase sites. (Yohannes 2008).

Archaeological evidence is indicating the area of Atsbi Wemberta and its environs was well within the geographical boundary of the ancient Aksumite. The Aksumite Kingdom lies between 13 and 17 degree north and 30 to 40 degree east, a geographical location that encompasses the study area. So, the history of Atsbi Wemberta and its environs can not be viewed separately from the history of Aksumite civilization. (Tekle 2007, Yohannes 2008)

## 5. DESSEA FOREST “PROTECTED AREA”

Dessa'a "Protected Area" lies between 130 201 and 140 101 North latitudes and between 390 321 and 390 551 East longitudes. It falls within two regions of Ethiopia, namely Tigray and the Afar Regional States. In Tigray Region, it covers three *Weredas*; Saesie Tsaeda Emba, Atsbi Wemberta and Enderta. And the part of the protected area falling in Afar Region touches the districts Shikhet, Berahle, and Dalol. However, considerable part of the area falls within Tigray Regional State. It was in 1993 that the area was demarcated and designated as 'Protected Area'. Its present boundaries were defined (delineated) during this time.

Dessa'a forest is densely covered with different indigenous forest species. The most dominant ones are "*Tshidi*" (*Janumetus procera*), "*Awlie*" (*olea europae*), "*Kot*" (*Ekbergia capensis*), "*tetaelo*" (*Rhus natalensis*), "*Cha'a*" (*Acacia abyssinica*), "*Metera*" (*Buddleja polystachya*), "*Tselimo*" (*Diaspyros abyssinica*) and "*Dawabesha*" (*Rhus quartiniaana*). (Zebeebe,1999).

## 6. GEO-TOURISM POTENTIAL OF THE AREA

The Atsbi area is known for its ancient rock hewn churches. The area is very close to Gerealta area where there are a large number of ancient Rock Hewn Churches. Located on the escarpment marking the western margin of the Great Ethiopian Rift Valley, the Atsbi area is very close to the Danakil Depression towards the east. The spectacular landscape at the margin can be a potential area for adventure tourism. There are ancient trade routes



between the salt mines in Danakil Depression and the highland areas. The strategic location of the area is ideal for tourists who come to see both cultural and natural heritage in the area. Similarly, the Offla area is characterized by a ragged landscape which may attract tourists for adventure tourism and mountain hiking.

## 7. OFFLA WEREDA CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Offla *Wereda* has diverse heritage resources that have big potential for tourism. Among the resources that can be considered as natural heritage includes natural forest, highland lake, caves, waterfall, hot spring water and very beautiful scenic mountain landscape. With regards to cultural heritage we find archaeological sites and churches. Most of the heritage sites are found within short distance of the *Wereda* capital Korem.

**Table 2: Heritage Resources in Offla *Wereda***

No.	Natural Heritage	Cultural Heritage
1	Hungumburda Forest	Archaeological Ruins of <i>Mifsas Bahery</i>
2	Grakahessu Forest	<i>Tikule Eminy</i> Tumulus
3	Lake Ashenge	Shrines of the cave of <i>Hayalo</i>
4	Hot Spring of Moden Korem	Local Cultural traditions (Ceremonies, <i>Keles</i> traditional wrestling, traditional dressing, Local food and drinks )
5	Holla Waterfall of Hayalo	
6	Mount Hawseba and Hayalo	

The history of research areas leads the research team to approach the landscape of Atsbi and Offla *Weredas*, with the range of question in mind:-

- How do Landscape and history intersect?
- What can we read in the physical environment about the entwinement of people, culture and place in the locations?

are reflected in their categories we use to talk about the physical and cultural aspect of the landscape that is the natural heritage, archaeology, historic and cultural heritages.

## 8. NATURAL HERITAGES OF THE STUDY AREA

The Northern Ethiopia is not known for its forest resources. Nevertheless we find in the study area fragmented forest habitat such as Dessa's Forest Protected Area, Hugumburda and Grat Kahu Forest Protected Area and Hashenge Highland Lake and lake side Area.



## Biodiversity

Dessa's Forest Protected Area, Hugumburda and Grat Kahsu Forest Protected Area are the few highland mountain areas that still survive in the Northern Ethiopia. They are covered with different indigenous forest species and are rich in biodiversity. For example Dessa's forest is densely covered with different indigenous forest species such as "*Tshidi*" (*Janumetus procera*), "*Awlie*" (*olea europae*), "*Kot*" (*Ekbergia capensis*), "*tetaelo*" (*Rhus natalensis*), "*Cha'a*" (*Acacia abyssinica*), "*Metera*" (*Buddleja polystachya*), "*Tselimo*" (*Diaspyros abyssinica*) and "*Dawabesha*" (*Rhus quartiniaana*). (Zenebe,1999). With regard to Hugumburda and Grat Kahsu Forest Protected Area, there is a distinctive flora associated with this area that includes the rare e mesembryanthemum) and the shrub *Cadia purpurea*. The forest is drying evergreen/coniferous with *Juniperus procera*, *Olea europaea cuspidata* and some *Podocarpus falcatus* in the higher sections. In the lower section, it is found *Millettia ferruginea*, *Croton macrostachyus*, *Celtis africana*, *Ekebergia capensis*, *Prunus africana*, *Cordia Africana* and *Ficus* spp. are more common(Zenebe,1999 and Wild Life Society).

With regards to Lake Hashenge, while its environ is heavily cultivated, there are some trees that are found in the area, often confined to domestic gardens, including *Acacia shrubs*, *Croton macrostachyus*, *Vernonia amygdalina* and *Buddleja polystachya*. Additionally, some forest trees are found around churches and in Muslim graveyards: species include *Acacia abyssinica*, *A. pilispina*, *Ekbergia capensis*, *Juniperus procera* and *Olea europaea cuspidata* (Wild Life Society).

## Birds

There is significant bird species diversity in the study area, provided by the combination wetland and forest habitat. In Dess'a, it is the only known location in Ethiopia for *Emberiza cineracea*, bird species. The *Circus macrourus*, *Tockus flavirostris*, *Uraeginthus ianthinogaster* and *Aquila nipalensis* are some among the bird species. Hugumburda and Grat Kahsu Forest Protected Area is also rich in endemic bird such as *Parophasma galinieri*. There are also like *Bostrychia carunculata*, and *Sylvia nisoria*. Lake Hashenge and its environ, there are also endemic birds such as *Serinus nigriceps*, *Columba albitorques*, *Onychognathus albirostris* and *Corvus crassirostris*.



### **Scenic Values**

Dessa's, Hugumburda and Grat Kahu Forest Protected Areas and Hashenge Highland Lake have fantastic scenic attraction, undisturbed by modern development. The high mountainous landscape of Dess'a, Hugumburda and Grat Kahu, the lush forest cover, the streams, the geology and the terraced farmlands at the edge protected area shows the scenic beauty of nature in the area. With regards to Lake Hashenge and its environs, the beautiful lake shore setting and the towering mountains that encircle the lake are some of the unique landscape features that are found in the area.

### **Conservation Issues**

Accelerated deforestation and habitat fragmentation that arise largely due to the conversion of forest to other agricultural land use type and overutilization of forest resources to satisfy the food, energy, and construction requirements of the increasing population are major environmental concerns in the study areas.

Lake Hashenge is under a serious pressure of pollution and siltation. The nearby mountains are continuously cultivated for years. Currently, the farmers have been using chemical products for their farm lands. This resulting accumulation of chemical residues in the lake could have a serious negative impact on the productivity of this wetland. Moreover, the intense farming and cultivation increases the probability of siltation problem.

Some of the natural heritages are situated in the area under legal protection known as 'Protected Areas' not as "Natural Parks" whereas, other are not. This legal vacuum could be creating serious problems in the protection of natural heritages. Beside the guards protecting the natural heritage are few in number and are not regularly paid.

## **9. CONCLUSION**

Archaeological investigation in the two *Weredas* is not well studied when compared to North Eastern and Central Tigray. Investigating the archaeology of the study areas could reveal new historical perspective on how our society evolved and interacted over the centuries. In both Astbi Wenberta and Offla *Weredas*, during our survey, we have encountered archaeological sites. While in Astbi Wemberta, the archaeological sites consist mainly of tumulus sites, in Offla *Wereda* the archaeology consist of an ancient ruined church and a tumulus site. The archaeological sites could tell us the history of the people interaction and the cultural landscape formation in the studied area.



The archaeological potential of Astbi Wemberta *Wereda* is not very known, since limited number of investigation and survey were done in the *Wereda*. As describe in the previous chapter, the archaeology consist of mainly of tumulus sites probably dating back to the Pre-Aksumite and Aksumite period. The long history of the area is attributed to location Astbi Wemberta *Wereda* along the existing route to Salt trade and salt mining localities in the Afar. Most of the archaeological sites of the two *Weredas*, are scattered and are found in remote places. Some of the archaeological sites are actually found on farmlands. Others are found nearby gravel road. Thus it is very difficult to undertake effective monitoring of their conservation as they are not protected. The majority of the sites are not fenced and in majority cases there is little or no awareness about the value of the heritages sites among the community living nearby. One example is the case of Mefsas Bahery ruin site, although fenced, the site is still cultivated by the farmer who own the land, as no compensation is given to him by responsible governmental body.

Most of the archaeological sites of the two *Weredas* are in serious danger as there is little or no attention and protection.

It can be said with confidence that ancient churches of Astbi *Wemberta* were carved prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> century AD. This means that they are at least more than four hundred years old. They have been exposed for natural and manmade hazards. As we mentioned in the previous Chapter, some of churches are in danger of deterioration from water dripping from the roof of the natural shelter, animal burrowing of the structures, and percolation of water through the rocks.

The management systems of the church including its conservation and maintenance are very much done in traditional way. This traditional way has been handed over from one generation to another. But with the advent of tourism there seem to be serious challenge in how best to cope with the needs and requirement for tourists. This is because the churches are not primarily tourist attractions, but active site of spiritual activities.

Thus, the churches are tied with a number of bureaucracies such as finding the priest who carries a key, irregular entrance fees and payment, prohibition of taking photographs. In addition to this, some churches completely deny entrance to tourist to both domestic and foreign tourist. This situation hampers the tourism sector as it reduces the appeal of the churches as tourist attraction



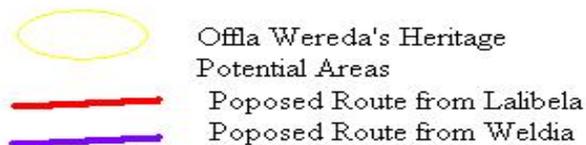
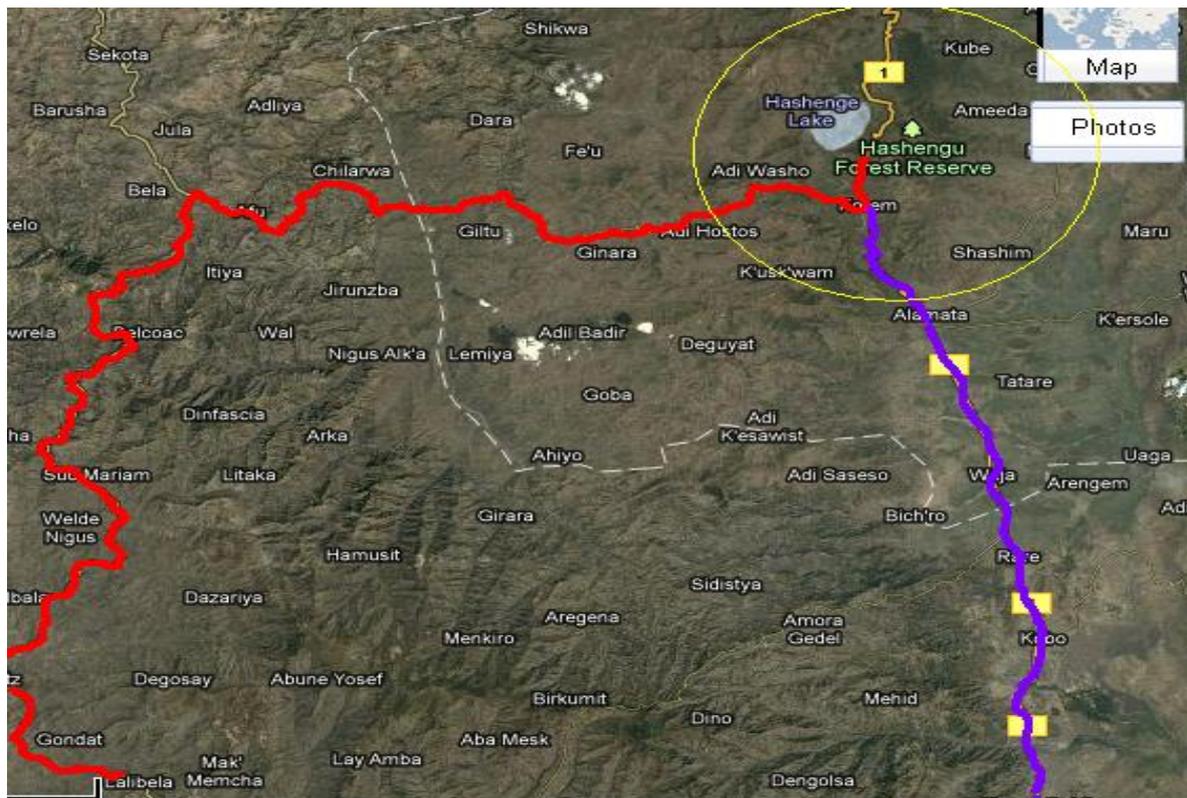
- Zoning of Heritage Sites: All heritages resources of in the study area have no zoning of heritage sites that includes principles, rules and regulations that govern the interaction of the local community and heritage sites. Thus, developing spatial demarcations should be prepared for better management of the heritage sites.
- The most of natural heritage sites of the study area are under the legal protection of 'Protected Area' this is not enough by itself. Therefore, the responsible government bodies should upgrade 'Protected Area' into the 'National Park' so that they could transform to the research sites and tourist attractions.

Information and data of the natural heritages of the study area are scattered and not well documented. Stakeholders including higher institutions should undertake the concern by establishing documentation and information centre. So as to develop a herbarium center and natural history museum at locality level

- To make more the historic and cultural heritages of Atsbi Wembeta Wereda a tourist destination the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Tigray Agency for Culture and Tourism, should prepare working manuals and sign Memorandum of Understanding.
- Tourism development and strategies for presenting the natural and cultural heritage of the study area should be participatory and create an opportunity for the local community to generate incomes. In the two Weredas there are potential areas for community based eco-tourism (E.g Lake Hashenge and its environs, Hugumburda, and Cherkos Agobo areas).
- A suspension bridge should be built for tourist and local community purpose at Hugumburda - Grat-Khasu 'Protected Area' and Dess'a to facilitate the movements of tourists who wish to walk or hike within the forest area.
- All responsible bodies should develop and promote the potential tourist route of both *Weredas* proposed by this research (See below Suggested Tourist Route).

### **Suggested Tourist Route**

Offla *Wereda's*



For the Offla *Wereda's* heritage site, two potential routes have been suggested. One is the route starting from Lalibela and taking the direction to Sekota in Amhara Regional State and then taking the road to Korem. The advantage of this route is that it connect all the major tourist sites of Lalibela and its environ with that of heritage sites found in the Offla *Wereda*. The second suggested route is that of the Addis Ababa – Mekelle highway, where those tourists using this route would stop over at Korem and take time to enjoy the natural and cultural heritage as well as the scenic landscape of Offla *Wereda*.

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