

THE ECONOMIC VALUES OF CALLIGRAPHIC INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE INHERITANCE FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE SOUTH GONDAR ZONE, ETHIOPIA

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Abstract: Ethiopia possesses rich and longstanding indigenous calligraphic Ge'ez manuscript heritages. In the South Gondar Zone of North-Western Ethiopia, indigenous calligraphic practices have been preserved and transmitted for centuries. Despite this enduring tradition, the inheritance of the indigenous calligraphic knowledge of Ge'ez manuscripts and its economic value for tourism development keep on under-researched. This study examines the economic value of contemporary indigenous calligraphy in Ge'ez manuscripts for tourism development across five districts of the South Gondar Zone, where these traditions remain vibrant. The study employed a qualitative, exploratory design grounded in interpretivist philosophy. Data were collected from calligraphers, tourism officers, and community leaders in five South Gondar districts through interviews, focus groups, and observations, and analysed thematically. The findings show that calligraphy generates economic value through employment, sales of calligraphic products, and its use as motivational and symbolic gifts. However, it remains underutilized in tourism planning. Improving visibility and market integration could significantly strengthen cultural tourism development in the study area. Indigenous calligraphy is an under-recognized cultural resource for tourism development in South Gondar Zone. Recognizing, promoting, and institutionalizing calligraphic indigenous knowledge of Ge'ez manuscript heritage of South Gondar Zone through the strong engagement of stakeholders, expanded indigenous calligraphic open-air museums of Ge'ez manuscript and incorporation of the indigenous calligraphic practices of South Gondar Zone in the major tourism circuits of Ethiopia can support sustainable economic development.

Keywords: calligraphic inheritance, Indigenous knowledge, economic value, tourism development, South Gondar Zone

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INTRODUCTION

1. Background and Rationale

In Ethiopia, many calligraphic heritages are crafted from stones, metals, wood, parchments, and other precious materials. Nosnitsin (2012) confirmed that writing existed in Ethiopia long before the establishment of manuscripts, primarily in the form of epigraphic monuments. Many of these inscriptions are trilingual, written in Greek, (pseudo) Sabaeen, & Ge'ez (Avanzini, 2007; Esler, 2019; Henze, 2000; Munro-Hay, 1991; Pankhurst, 1961). The earliest Ge'ez inscriptions, dating back to the 5th century B.C., were discovered in Matara near Axum (Gobezie, 2008; Assabie & Bigun, 2007).

Evidence of an organized state in northern Ethiopia predates the fifth century B.C., with inscriptions referencing two contending families ruling a territory known as DMT or Da'amat. By this time, the associated state and civilization were well established (Tamrat, 1993). Similarly, Tefera (2010) and Hable Sillasie (1981) noted that during the third and fourth centuries, Ethiopia had diverse forms of handwriting carved on stone, metal, clay, and wood. Nosnitsin (2020) and Bausi (2014) further confirmed that Ethiopia has been a significant important center of scribal culture since the fourth century.

There are two types of calligraphic studies: paleography and epigraphy. Paleography focuses on the study of handwritten materials from ancient and medieval times, such as writing on papyrus, parchments, paper, and other perishable materials. In contrast, epigraphy deals with inscriptions carved or engraved on durable materials like metal or stone (Harkavy, 1999). At Yeha, Kaskase, and Hawelti-Melazo, inscriptions from pre-Aksumite times were written in the epigraphic script (Munro-Hay, 1991). Similarly, the calligraphic works found on Axum stelae, Tiya standing stone, and the rock-hewn churches of Saint Lalibela are carved in stone, embodying the very nature of calligraphy (Budge, 2014).

These heritage sites are inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List (Assefa, 2013; Joussaume, 2010), generating income from national and international tourists (Assefa, 2013; Heldman, 1993). Scholarly work on Ge'ez calligraphy has traditionally focused on three main areas: translation, composition, and copying. For example, hagiographic texts were

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among the works translated from Greek during Aksumite period (Nosnitsin, 2005). In the 14th century, numerous religious texts were translated from Arabic to Ge'ez during the reign of King Amde Tsion (1304–1334) (Gelaw, 2007).

The Kibre Negest is a collection of legends and stories believed to have originally been written in Arabic and translated into Ge'ez by the early fourteenth century (Esler, 2019). Ethiopian scholars have also been engaged in original composition for centuries. A notable example is the master chant book *Diggwa*, composed by Saint Yared during the Aksumite period (Haile, 1993). Alongside translation and composition, copying has played a crucial role in preserving and developing Ge'ez calligraphy. Most Ge'ez manuscripts found in churches and monasteries are the results of copying, and today's calligraphers primarily work as copyists rather than as translators or composers. At various times, church scholars have investigated these manuscripts. In the context of commentary education development, Memhir Esdros and Memhir Welde'ab examined 300 and 600 manuscripts, respectively (Tefera, 2019; Werkinah, 1971). In recent years, modern researchers, including Sahile (2021), Neqatibeb (2019), Habtie (2019), Getaneh (2019), Alebachew (2018), Solomon (2018), Gebreyes (2016), Winslow (2015), and Hailu (2008), have also conducted studies on Ge'ez manuscripts. Traditional scholars have primarily focused on the religious values embedded in these manuscripts. In contrast, modern scholars have concentrated on producing critical editions, annotated translations, and content analyses of early Ge'ez manuscripts. However, these studies have largely overlooked the economic significance of calligraphic indigenous knowledge, which could enhance tourism development. To address this difficulty, a new philological methodology has emerged as an alternative approach to manuscript studies (Restall, 2003). The new, or material, philology differs from traditional Lachmannian textual criticism (Nichols, 1990) in that it transforms our understanding of texts by foregrounding manuscripts as tangible objects, embracing textual variants as meaningful traces of a text's life, and drawing on interdisciplinary insights to show how texts evolve, circulate, and are interpreted over time (Nichols, 1990; Restall, 2003; Stolz, 2003). This method aims to insights into socio-cultural, economic, and intellectual contexts more effectively than other types of literature (Restall, 2003).

Moreover, in applying the new philological approach, the SGZ had a particular calligraphy school where individuals received specialized training in calligraphic skills. For instance, from the 1950s to the 1980s, Andabet, among the districts of SGZ, attracted students from other prominent learning centers, such as the Digwa School of Bethlehem and the Qene schools of Gojjam and Wadla in Wello (Werkinah, 1971; Hable Sillasia, 1972; Hable Sillasia, 1981; Tafera, 2010). The districts of Dera, Estie, Farta, and Debre Tabor in the SGZ are also notable centers, possessing extensive indigenous knowledge of calligraphy in Ge'ez manuscripts, which represents a valuable resource for tourism development.

A former Ethiopian student from the SGZ, for instance, crafted his clothes and robe from the sheepskin. Traditional church students were not only engaged in calligraphic work but also in preparing and selling inks for calligraphers. In addition to inheriting indigenous knowledge of calligraphy, these students actively participated in the economic activities associated with the craft (Getahun, 1962). However, the economic value of the calligraphic indigenous knowledge of SGZ and its contribution for tourism development in the zone is under-researched.

Former Ethiopian church students from the SGZ, for instance, crafted their clothing and robe from sheepskin. Traditional church students participated not only in calligraphy but also in producing and selling inks, engaging in the economic aspects of the craft. In addition to inheriting indigenous calligraphic knowledge, they were involved in related income-generating activities (Getahun, 1962). Nevertheless, the economic value of contemporary indigenous calligraphic knowledge in the SGZ and its contribution to tourism development has yet to be thoroughly examined.

2. Objective

This study aimed to examine the economic value of inherited indigenous calligraphic knowledge for tourism development in the South Gondar Zone.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

1. The Direct Economic Value of Calligraphic Heritage

Tourism is becoming a keystone of many economies worldwide (Mammadov & Saltik, 2026). As heritage increasingly functions as a source of entrepreneurship and income generation (Lowenthal, 1998), heritage tourism has been advanced as a viable economic alternative for struggling rural areas, helping to offset industrial decline while enhancing destination differentiation in a competitive tourism market (Dragouni, 2017). In a similar way, calligraphy, produced by artists motivated by both livelihood and practical concerns, can be understood as a form of entrepreneurial heritage (Salmon, 2020). Currently, many institutions and spaces are deliberately designed to cultivate individual talent and interest in calligraphic art while also functioning as centers for the production and sale of calligraphy tools and artworks. One such example is the An-Nida Calligraphy House (Manurung & Wiguna, 2023). Calligraphy is therefore closely linked to commercial activity. For example, in Indonesia, calligraphy was introduced to the archipelago through trade as early as the 7th century AD and had become widespread by the 12th century AD (Hidayat, 2015).

2. The Tourism Promotion Tool Value of Calligraphy

Calligraphy functions both as a tourism product and as a promoter of tourism products. It serves as a self-promoter for national tourists and residents through exhibition and marketing areas, and it also acts as an international promoter by being presented as diplomatic gifts to foreign rulers. For example, Shah, a famous calligrapher who famously said, "My reed pen shames Jupiter and Mercury," is known to have sent illuminated pages of calligraphy as diplomatic gifts to foreign dignitaries (Ekhtiar, 2006). Various calligraphic products are used in promotional activities. Like other single-page calligraphies, *Masha* pages were often created for commemorative purposes, such as gifts at births, holidays, and official occasions, military victories, and diplomatic meetings (Ekhtiar, 2006). Additionally, the Shanghai Painting and Calligraphy Society often hold exhibitions to

promote calligraphy products, generating profits through sales (Ren & Phungamdee, 2022). Similarly, calligraphy and painting exhibitions were held in Java even before the establishment of the Indonesian Calligraphers Association (Salmon, 2020).

3. Theoretical Framework: Cultural Transmission Theory

Cultural transmission theory examines variations in culture and explains observed differences in socio-economic outcomes (Bar-El et al., 2006) and culture is a vital tourism resource (Ghosh et al, 2026). It is particularly relevant cultural persistence of calligraphic indigenous knowledge, as cultural persistence fundamentally depends on transmission, the passing of information from one individual to another or from one group to another (Schönpflug, 2008). Culture itself is a complex of material and intellectual values established by humankind (Kováts-Németh, 2016), and its inheritance involves various transmitters or models during transmission process, such as mothers, fathers, teachers, and peers (Schönpflug, 2008; Eerkens & Lipo, 2007). Key questions arising from this theory include: How is the culture of calligraphy in SGZ transmitted? What are the economic values associated with the transmission of SGZ's calligraphic heritage?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research was conducted in five districts of the SGZ in northern Ethiopia: Andabet, Estie, Dera, Farta, and Debre Tabor. Recognizing that trustworthy knowledge is generated through detailed interpretation of social phenomena, the study adopted an interpretivist paradigm (Rahi, 2017), which emphasizes participants' perspectives on the situations being investigated (Creswell, 2009). A qualitative research approach with an exploratory design was employed. This approach was chosen due to the limited existing research, the need for in-depth participant narratives, the requirement for substantial researcher observation (Rahi, 2017), and the study's aim to explore, describe, and explain the economic value of the contemporary indigenous calligraphic knowledge for tourism development in the SGZ (Leavy, 2022). Furthermore, snowball sampling was utilized, consistent with the researchers' emphasis on processes, rich descriptions, interpretations, and explanations of the calligraphic indigenous knowledge inheritance and its economic significance (Kothari, 2004).

Semi-structured in-depth interviews, FGDs, and observations were the primary data collection tools used in this study. Semi-structured in-depth interviews between the researchers and informants were designed to capture participants' perspectives on their lives, experiences, and situations in their own words (Tisdell et al., 2025; Veal, 2017; Taylor et al., 2017). The researchers selected this interview approach because it offers rich insights into the context of people's behaviors and experiences, as well as information about events and activities that cannot be directly observed (Seidman, 2006). Thus, the methods flow chart is presented in Figure 1.

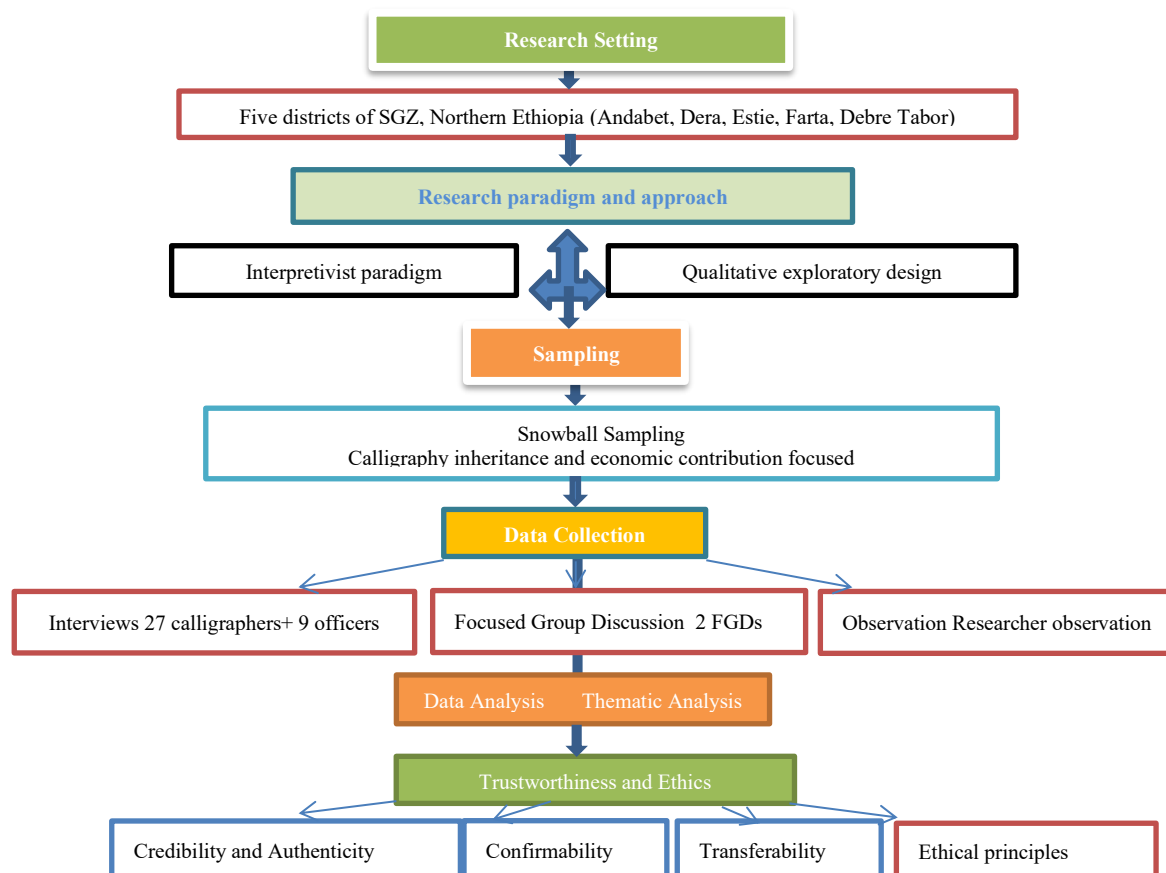


Figure 1. Method flow chart

In the FGDs, the researchers facilitated and moderated discussions among group members to encourage interaction and the sharing of diverse viewpoints (Taylor et al., 2015; Dawson, 2007). Since indigenous calligraphic knowledge originates

from the calligraphers of the SGZ, 27 calligraphers were interviewed. In addition, five officers from the culture and tourism offices of the five districts, one officer from the Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism Bureau, one leader from a culture office, and one leader from the culture and tourism department of the tourism office were interviewed. Scholars and local community members were also interviewed; however, these interviewees had limited information regarding the economic value of SGZ calligraphic works. Data saturation determined the final number of participants.

Consequently, the study involved a total of 36 interviewees and two focus group discussions (FGDs). All participants were selected due to their direct involvement in and concern for the inheritance of calligraphic knowledge, as they are key actors in SGZ calligraphy, either as practicing calligraphers or as officers in culture and tourism institutions. Qualitative data analysis involves carefully reading the entire dataset, developing codes to describe meaningful segments of data, combining and reclassifying these codes into categories, and systematically organizing the categories into typologies or classifications based on shared characteristics, taxonomies, and hierarchical structures (Lapan et al., 2012; Dawson, 2009). Accordingly, this study employed coding and thematic analysis (Dawson, 2009; Winston, 2012). The trustworthiness of this study was established by adhering to key qualitative research criteria: credibility, authenticity, confirmability, and transferability (Tisdell et al., 2025; Leavy, 2022). Credibility was ensured through the use of multiple data collection methods, including interviews, FGDs, observations, document analysis, and literature review, as well as through close researcher engagement.

The authenticity of the research was strengthened by having supervisors, reviewers, and calligraphers evaluate the data collection tools. Confirmability was supported through cross-checking procedures and by reviewing the study’s findings, conclusions, and implications. Transferability was achieved by providing rich, detailed descriptions of the findings, discussions, conclusions, and recommendations. The researchers conducted the study with integrity and respect for participants’ rights (Veal, 2017), ensuring that all data were anonymized and kept confidential (Dawson, 2019). In addition, the study adhered to three fundamental ethical principles: beneficence, respect, and justice (Lapan et al., 2012).

RESULTS

1. Respondents’ profile

This study involved 36 respondents, of whom 33 were male and 3 were female. The males consisted of calligraphers, officers, and leaders, while the females were officers and leaders in district culture and tourism offices. Among the respondents, 27 were calligraphers from the districts (Figure 2). As shown in Graph 01, their distribution by district is as follows: 11 from Andabet, 6 from Dera, 3 from Debre Tabor, 4 from Estie, and 2 from Farta. The ages of calligraphers ranged from 35 to 67 years, with 3 to 35 years of experience in calligraphy. All calligraphers were trained through traditional church education. Among them, three were Merigetias (teachers), 22 were priests, and 2 were deacons. Additionally, two had some modern education, one in grade 8 and one in grade 10. The officers were employees of the Culture and Tourism Offices in Andabet, Dera, Estie, Debre Tabor, and Farta, as well as the SGZ Culture and Tourism Department, the Amhara National Regional Culture and Tourism Bureau, and one officer from the Diocese of the SGZ.

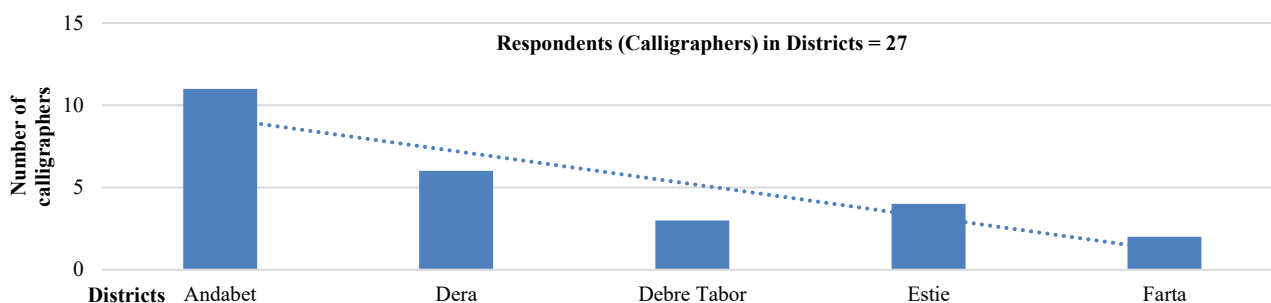


Figure 2. Respondents of the research

2. The Economic Values of Calligraphic Indigenous Knowledge Inheritance

The Ge’ez calligraphy of the SGZ has notable economic value, as it relies on locally sourced materials and indigenous knowledge to produce durable manuscripts that have been used for centuries (Participant 19, Andabet; Participant 10, Dera). This economic value emerges across multiple stages, including raw skin sourcing, parchment preparation, calligraphic production, motivational gifts, employment, and finishing processes.

2.1. Values from the raw skin

Goat owners, including individuals, food-service institutions (hotels and restaurants), and goatskin merchants, derive income from the sale of skins for calligraphic production. Calligraphers acquire these skins either directly from individuals or through merchant organizations (Participant 01, Debre Tabor; Participant 03, Estie; Participant 13, Andabet). The price of goat skins varies by season, location, size, and quality, and fluctuates with market conditions. In rural areas and district towns such as Andabet, Estie, Debre Tabor, and Wereta, skins typically sell for 30–40 birr, whereas in Bahir Dar prices range from 80 to 100 birr or more, partly due to the larger size of skins from goats used by major food-service institutions (Participants 12 and 15, Andabet; Participant 10, Dera; Participant 03, Estie). Large goatskins, especially those from female goatskins, are preferred by calligraphers due to their size and quality (Participants 19 and 18, Andabet; Participants 06 and 07, Dera). As a result, the raw goat skins hold monetary value, particularly in the SGZ, where many calligraphers purchase skins both from their local districts and from Bahir Dar. Additionally, when calligraphers travel to sell their products, they

often take the opportunity to buy skins from other areas, such as Armachiho in Gondar and Lalibela in Wello (Participant 15, Andabet). However, these skin-buying activities also involve transportation costs, which are considered part of the overall value chain of calligraphy and benefit transport service providers. Currently, including transportation, cost of a large, high-quality goat skin is approximately 140 birr (Participants 18 and 12, Andabet).

2.2. Values from preparing parchments

The preparation of parchments has two economic values: one per skin and one per query. The per-skin value refers to the cost of preparing a single goat skin into vellum suitable for writing. Currently, the preparation alone costs 100 birr per skin (Participants 06 and 07, Dera). In this arrangement, the calligrapher supplies the raw skin to the parchment preparer. If the skin is provided by preparer, however, the total cost includes both the market price of the skin and cost of preparation. A preparer typically produces three to four parchments per day, earning between 300–400 birr daily. For example, producing a six-month synaxarium, commonly referred to as “a half synaxarium”, requires approximately 48 goat skins. From this single job, a parchment maker can earn around 4800 birr (48 skins × 100 birr each (Participants 06 and 07, Dera). The cost of preparing parchments varies depending on the location and professionals involved. For example, in Zebboyye Kebele, located in the Andabet district, some professionals specialize exclusively in parchment preparation. They charge 130 birr per goat skin. Preparing 48 skins would therefore cost 6,240.00 birr (48 times 130). This task takes about 12 days, as a professional can prepare 3–4 skins per day.

The average daily wage in this case is approximately 520.00 birr (Participants 12 and 21, Andabet). Moreover, the cost of preparing a query which requires two goat skins also varies by location. In Debre Tabor, the cost is around 1,750.00 birr, while in Bahir Dar it rises to 2,000.00 birr (Participant 22, Debre Tabor; Participant 01, Debre Tabor).

2.3. Economic values from calligraphy

This type of economic value stems from the skills and knowledge of calligraphers (Participant 27, Andabet, and Participant 01, Debre Tabor). In this field, a calligrapher is involved in parchment preparation, ink preparation, and most importantly, the act of writing. Calligraphers may work independently or on contractual agreement. Most calligraphers in the SGZ engage in a range of related activities beyond writing. These include purchasing goat skin, preparing parchments and inks, designing parchment layouts, and composing written works (Participants 16 and 19, Andabet; Participant 20, Dera; and Participant 28, Farta). Calligraphers primarily incur costs when purchasing goatskin and red ink (Participant 20, Dera; Participant 21, Andabet; and Participant 04, Farta).

The price of a manuscript reflects these expenses especially the labor involved in the parchment preparation and the knowledge and the effort required to produce the manuscript (Participant 11 Dera; Participant 05 Estie). Therefore, the highest economic value of calligraphic work in SGZ comes from the intellectual and physical investment of the calligrapher or from the market price at which the calligraphic works are sold to merchants. In recent years, calligraphy has generated significant economic benefits. One calligrapher gave witnesses of the following testimony:

I had stopped doing calligraphy because the market value of the work was weak. However, about five and six years ago, manuscripts such as the Homily of Michal (Dirsane Michael) and the praise of Mary were sold for 300,000.00 birr and 100,000.00 birr, respectively. That motivated me to return the work of calligraphy (Participant 03, Estie).

Likewise, Participant 13 from Andabet shared the following: *I produce the Miracle of Mary manuscript annually, using 120–130 goat skins from Bahir Dar at 150 birr each, totalling 19,500 birr including transportation. Ink costs are minimal. The manuscript sells for 200,000 birr at home or 230,000 birr if I travel to the buyer. Preparation takes 10 to 11 months.*

The manuscript's net value is about 180,500 birr after subtracting 19,500 birr in material costs from the 200,000 birr selling price. With an 11-month preparation period, the estimated monthly income is roughly 16,000 birr.

A calligrapher (Participant 17, Andabet) also explained: *I am currently writing the annual Miracle of Mary manuscript, requiring about 104 goat skins from Bahir Dar at 125–130 birr each, including transportation. It takes 10–12 months to complete, and its price typically ranges from 200,000 to 250,000 birr, depending on the contract with the customer.*

The calligrapher's net income (Participant 17) is about 211,000 birr, calculated by subtracting 13,520 birr for materials from the 250,000 birr selling price. Over 11 months, this amounts to an estimated monthly income of roughly 19,000 birr. Additionally, Participant 18 from Andabet shared the following: *I am writing the annual Miracle of Mary manuscript, which requires 112 goat skins at 130–140 birr each and takes about 12 months. I also spend 1,300 birr on Hareg, a decorative design by another calligrapher. Merchants buy the manuscript at my home for 150,000 to 200,000 birr.*

The calligrapher's net income (Participant 18) is about 158,020 birr, calculated by subtracting 16,980 birr in costs from the 175,000 birr average selling price. Over 12 months, this yields an estimated monthly income of roughly 13,000 birr. On the other hand, participant 15 explained:

I wrote the Psalm of David, a large version for Atrons, using 40 to 45 goat skins at 130 birr each (totaling ~5,850 birr). The manuscript sells for 100,000 to 200,000 birr and takes about eight months to complete while I also farm.

The calligrapher's net income (Participant 15) is about 144,150 birr after subtracting 5,850 birr in material costs from the 150,000 birr selling price, yielding an estimated monthly income of roughly 17,000 birr over eight months.

Likewise, Participant 27 in Andabet stated: *I wrote a New Testament manuscript following the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church tradition, including 35 books. The work takes one year, uses 140 goat skins (4 per quire for 35 quires) at 150 birr each, totaling 21,000 birr in materials, and sells for 200,000 birr.*

Participant 27's net income from his work is 179,000 birr, or about 14,900 birr per month. Writing the *Four Gospels* manuscript in 3 to 4 months, he spent 7,500 birr on 50 goat skins and earned a net income of 42,500 birr, averaging roughly 12,142 birr per month. Calligraphy prices vary with a calligrapher's skill and marketing ability. A manuscript of the *Synaxarium*

may sell for 60,000–70,000 birr without marketing expertise, while I sell similar works for around 150,000 birr (Participant 03, Estie). Some calligraphers work under contracts; for example, Participant 11 (Dera) earns 50,000 birr for the *Miracle of Mary* over nine months (~5,555 birr/month), while Participant 07 (Dera) has a 40,000 birr contract for the same manuscript.

Additionally, one of the calligraphers from the SGZ, originally from Andabet, started a calligraphic organization with two branches: one in Gondar and the other in Bahir Dar. The founder and owner of the organization shared the following:

I employ seven calligraphers in Gondar and Bahir Dar, purchasing their manuscripts under contract. For example, the Synaxarium is bought in two sections at 150,000 birr each (300,000 birr total) and sold for 400,000 birr. In Andabet, half-year and full-year Synaxarium manuscripts sell for 80,000–100,000 birr and 160,000–200,000 birr, respectively. I have also sold Praise of Mary (Wuddasie Maryam) and Arganon manuscripts to Ethiopians in America (Participant 23, Gondar).

Based on these data and the quality of calligraphic work, calligraphers' income varies with market access and business skills, highlighting the need to improve marketing for sustaining the art. Over the past three years, interest in calligraphy has grown, with items like a board of alphabets selling for 2,000 birr in Gondar (Participant 23, Gondar).

2.4. Motivational gifts as economic values of calligraphy

Contractors, both individuals and merchants, sometimes provide motivational gifts to calligraphers, either in cash or in kind. For example, the two calligraphers mentioned above (Participants 11 and 07, Dera), who produced the *Miracle of Mary* manuscripts for 50,000 birr and 40,000 birr respectively, each received a full set of attire (trousers, coat, shoes, and Kaba) as a motivational gift from their contractor. Likewise, the calligrapher (Participant 15) shared:

I once wrote a Four Gospels manuscript for a church in Gondar. The woman who contracted me paid 60,000 birr and, satisfied with the work, also gave me a bonus of 3,000 birr.

Similarly, Calligrapher Participant 13 stated:

I wrote more than 18 manuscripts while living in Lalibela. I had a contract with a monk there, and upon completing the work, he gave me motivational gifts, including clothing items such as coats, trousers, Kaba, and a prayer stick.

Generally, customers provide calligraphers with motivational gifts, either in cash or in kind. These include bonuses or clothing, given for manuscripts such as the *Miracle of Mary* and the *Four Gospels*, recognizing both effort and quality of work.

2.5. Economic value of calligraphy by hire or employment

Calligraphers have been employed by both monasteries and calligraphic organizations. For example, monasteries such as Debre Libanos hire calligraphers for calligraphic works. One calligrapher shared the following testimony.

At Debre Libanos monastery, I worked as a calligrapher for approximately 18 years. Along with my agreed monthly salary, the monastery provided me with free accommodation and meals (Participant 09, Estie).

Calligraphers employed by calligraphic work organizations have shared their experiences. For instance, a calligrapher hired by the Hamere Birhan calligraphic work organization explained:

I am a calligrapher from SGZ, hired by an Addis Ababa organization to write the Synaxarium manuscript over seven months. My salary ranged from 4,000 to 7,000 birr per month, with accommodation provided, and the manuscript may sell for up to 300,000 birr (Participant 03, Estie).

Calligrapher Participant 03 (Estie) noted that the Hamere Birhan calligraphy organization supported its staff by increasing salaries and providing free meals and dormitory accommodations. Based on the experiences of various calligraphers, many from the SGZ have been employed by Hamere Birhan in Addis Ababa (Participants 03 and 24, Estie; Participant 01, Debre Tabor). Additionally, Participant 15 (Andabet) stated that many SGZ calligraphers have also worked for the Debre Libanos calligraphy organization, where he personally earned 7,000 birr per month during three-month tenure.

2.6. Economic values from finishing works of calligraphy

Calligraphic economic value is also generated from finishing work such as design, binding, and decoration (Participant 02, Debre Tabor; Participant 08, Dera; and Participant 25, Andabet). Calligraphers have suggested witnesses to illustrate these added values. For example, Participant 27 (Andabet) stated:

I am writing a 35-book New Testament manuscript, and each book requires a hareg design on the first page, costing 150–500 birr. The total design cost ranges from 5,250 to 17,500 birr.

Participant 01 (Debre Tabor) noted that a single hareg design typically costs 300–400 birr, depending on complexity. While costs vary with manuscript size, a single painting can cost at least 3,000 birr, so a manuscript with 10 paintings would require 30,000 birr or more for artwork alone. Participant 18 (Andabet) stated that hareg designs cost about 100 birr each, totaling 1,300 birr for 13 designs in the *Miracle of Mary*. Participant 01 also noted that binding and decoration costs depend on manuscript size, ranging from 400 birr for the small *Praise of Mary* to 2,000 birr for the larger *Synaxarium*.

3. Stakeholders' Support for Calligraphy

Stakeholders play a crucial role in preserving and ensuring the economic sustainability of indigenous calligraphic knowledge. In Andabet district, the Culture and Tourism Office confirmed that local calligraphers have formed the Felege Tibeb Calligraphers Association (Officer 02 and Leader 01, Andabet). The association was established to promote unity among calligraphers, save funds for developing calligraphic work, access necessary infrastructure (such as workspaces, display areas, sales centers, and exhibition venues), and create marketing opportunities (Officer 02 and Leader 01, Andabet; Calligraphers 13 and 21, Andabet). It holds regular meetings every three months to address these objectives (Participants 13, 18, and 19, Andabet). During meetings, a Culture and Tourism Office representative helps lead discussions, raise awareness, and convey the association's concerns. The office also submits land access requests to the Land Administration

and issues letters certifying calligraphers' permission to sell their work (Officer 02 and Leader 01; Calligraphers 13 and 21, Andabet). The Debre Tabor town culture and tourism office supports calligraphers by raising awareness and inviting them to exhibitions in Bahir Dar and Gondar, though it currently lacks the capacity to organize them or provide workspaces (Officer 01, Debre Tabor). Similarly, the Farta district culture and tourism office promotes calligraphy as indigenous knowledge and involves calligraphers in exhibitions during events such as the Mahidere Maryam religious festivals (Officer 03, Debre Tabor). The culture and tourism office of Estie (Officer 04) stated that their office has supported calligraphers by offering recognition and providing letters of ownership, which help calligraphers when selling their work.

However, according to officers (03, Debre Tabor and 05, Dera), calligraphers in Farta and Dera do not request such ownership letters from their respective offices. Overall, officers, leaders, and FGD participants confirmed that the inheritance of indigenous knowledge and its economic benefit in the SGZ have not received sufficient attention from key stakeholders, particularly the offices of Culture and Tourism, Education, and Labor and Skills (Officer 01, Debre Tabor; Officer 02, Andabet; Officer 03, Farta; Officer 04, Estie; Officer 05, Dera; Officer 06, Bahir Dar; Leader 01, Andabet, and Leaders 02 and 03, Debre Tabor; FGD 2, Andabet; and FGD 1, Debre Tabor).

DISCUSSION

Ge'ez calligraphic inheritance was developed through translation, composition, and copying. Hagiographic texts were translated from Greek during the Aksumite period (Nosnitsin, 2005), and many religious works were later translated from Arabic in the reign of King Amde Tsion (1304–1334) (Gelaw, 2007).

By contrast, the chant book *Dəggwa* was composed by Saint Yared (Haile, 1993). Today, most Ge'ez manuscripts result from copying, and contemporary calligraphers mainly work as copyists. Furthermore, the SGZ has a long tradition of manuscript production, reflecting a deeply rooted calligraphic heritage. Some manuscripts originating from the SGZ are over 1,500 years old. Evidence from the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library (EMML) shows that manuscripts such as EMML 7618, EMML 8769, EMML 8897, EMML 8900, EMML 8726, EMML 8854, EMML 8829, and EMML 7619 were produced in the 6th, 13th, 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, respectively. While the study of Ethiopia's Ge'ez manuscripts has long focused on philology and linguistics, the contemporary approach of new philology examines them as material artifacts with social, economic, and cultural significance (Ingeborg Lied & Lundhaug, 2017; Trachsler, 2006). For example, in Indonesia, New Philology was applied by Manurung & Wiguna (2023) to analyze the An-Nida Calligraphy business through the lens of Islamic economics. In contrast, studies on Ge'ez manuscripts have primarily focused on textual construction, critical editions, annotated translations, and content analysis (Sahile, 2021; Neqatibeb, 2019; Habtie, 2019; Getaneh, 2019; Alebachew, 2018; Solomon, 2018; Gebreyes, 2016; Winslow, 2015; Hailu, 2008). Our study offers a unique contribution by highlighting the economic value of contemporary calligraphy in the SGZ, expanding the scope beyond traditional textual analysis.

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A key deficiency in cultural development is the lack of inclusion of calligraphy in tourism, education, heritage policies, and international heritage frameworks. For example, the Ethiopian Tourism Policy of 2009 and the Ethiopian Heritage Proclamations of 2000 and 2006 make no reference to promoting or developing contemporary Ge'ez calligraphic works, nor do they recognize their economic contribution to tourism development (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2009; Federal Negarit Gazeta 209/2000; Federal Negarit Gazeta 484/2006).

CONCLUSION

The calligraphic knowledge of the SGZ is motivated by blessings from manuscript owners, economic benefits, and creating a personal legacy. Transmitted inter-generationally, SGZ calligraphers produce a wide range of manuscripts, including Old and New Testament texts, hagiographies, homilies, miracle accounts, smaller manuscripts, and boards of letters.

The calligraphic works of the SGZ hold significant economic value, derived from the sale of materials such as skins and vellums, completed manuscripts, employment in calligraphic organizations, motivational gifts, and income from finishing work such as painting, binding, and decoration. SGZ calligraphers primarily use locally sourced materials, including animal skins and natural ingredients for ink production. In addition to their economic role, SGZ calligraphic works preserve and transmit indigenous knowledge, as reflected in the preparation of various Ge'ez manuscripts, including the New Testament (with its eight canonical books), the *Synaxarium*, and the *Miracle of Mary*, among others.

The production and trade of these works generate economic benefits for calligraphers, painters, and merchants, while also contributing to tourism development in the SGZ. Overall, the calligraphic knowledge of the SGZ represents both a cultural and economic asset. Motivated by spiritual blessings, economic benefits, and personal legacy, this intergenerational tradition preserves and transmits indigenous knowledge through the production of a wide range of manuscripts.

Beyond their cultural significance, these works generate income for calligraphers, painters, and merchants, while also contributing to local tourism, highlighting the enduring value of SGZ calligraphy as both heritage and livelihood.

Recommendation

The calligraphic work of the SGZ has significant policy implications for both the inheritance of indigenous knowledge and the development of tourism. To support the preservation and advancement of this heritage, relevant Ethiopian ministries, including the Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Culture and Sport, Ministry of Labor and Skills, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Economy, should establish comprehensive policies that recognize and safeguard calligraphic heritage, engage stakeholders in knowledge transmission and business activities, and enhance the marketing and promotion of calligraphy-related tourism. In addition to policy measures, stakeholders should actively engage in initiatives that support calligraphers, develop tourism business plans, and address security concerns.

- ❖ Motivating calligraphers to produce high-quality manuscripts is crucial, considering factors such as alphabet structure, punctuation, layout, colors, painting techniques, parchment and ink quality, binding, and decorative features.

- ❖ Developing calligraphic tourism in the SGZ requires government, EOTC, community, and NGO involvement. Promoting local calligraphers, increasing manuscript prices, and applying a marketing mix strategy can sustain calligraphy as both a cultural treasure and an economic asset.

- ❖ Students of traditional church education have helped preserve and transmit Ge'ez calligraphy, crafting sheepskin clothing and producing inks, while also participating in its economic aspects (Getahun, 1962).

- ❖ Security concerns threaten the SGZ calligraphy trade. Traditionally sold across Ethiopia and to foreign customers, current challenges require urgent action to ensure a safe environment for calligraphers and merchants.

- ❖ Finally, beyond this study, it would be valuable to conduct national and international trend analyses, along with future projections, on the inheritance of Ge'ez calligraphic knowledge and the development of the calligraphy-based tourism sector.

Abbreviations: The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

SGZ - South Gondar Zone; FGD - Focus Group Discussion; EMMML - Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library

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