A Quick Glimpse at Public and Academic Libraries in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Marie Paiva
*University of Utah, marie.paiva@utah.edu*

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This new browsing/requesting process has eliminated the biggest barrier between me and a good book — effort. Because I can put a hold on up to ten books at a time, I only go to the library when I know my trip is going to be successful. Every time I go to the library I leave with at least one book. Often, I pick up my book on hold and browse the new shelves, and pick up some more. I probably check out between ten and 20 books a month using this method. I always have ten books on hold, thanks to my very long “to read” list. As soon as I check out one book, I put another on hold. I can even put books on order on hold, which let me check out the fifth Harry Potter book from the library the day it was available for sale in bookstores.

I have heard people argue that browsing books on a shelf is better than browsing online. The opposite is true for me. It’s easier to click on a link in an online bookstore catalog than to pick a book up off the shelf to read the cover blurb. All I have to feel is a tug of interest, and it goes on the list. I don’t have to have any real sense that I am going to even like a book to put it on my list, and eventually check it out from the library. Friends and family use my list for gift giving, insuring that I get something every time that I am interested in reading, and that Amazon.com gets something out of offering their fabulous wish list service.

I am reading more books now than I ever have before, and reading more widely than ever. I check out more books from the library, and buy more books from the bookstore because I have an easier way to learn what is available, and to decide where I am going to get it.

But the bottom line, for both printed and audio-books, is that in the online world, I hear about and get intrigued by and stumble upon lots and lots of books that sound really interesting — through many more channels than I did in the pre-online world. And, because of the ease of keeping track and remembering that I wanted to have a look at something, I actually put my hands on a lot more books. And I read more of them and a greater diversity of titles than I think I would have in a print world.

A Quick Glimpse at Public and Academic Libraries in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

by Marie Paiva (Volunteer Librarian, Addis Ababa University, and Anthropology, Economics, and Psychology Librarian, Marriott Library, University of Utah, 295 S. 1500 East, Salt Lake City, UT, 84112; Phone: 801-581-6273) <marie.paiva@utah.edu>

Ethiopia’s 80 million people continue to live in a country with poor infrastructure in the Horn of Africa region. The population of Addis Ababa is estimated at 10-15 million and libraries have just recently been given some recognition. When I first came to this country as an ALA-USIA Fellow in 1997, most people did not know the difference between a library and bookstore. I think that has changed somewhat today.

Public Libraries in Addis Ababa
Public libraries in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia’s capital city are about 100 in number and vary greatly in size. On Tuesday, a colleague and I visited the nearby Addis Ababa Public Library in Sidist Kilo. The Head Librarian, Ato Tameru Abdisa, met with us...
It’s a sort of system for asynchronous desire. Between Amazon and the County system, I don’t have to find the idea interesting and actually go get the book at this same time. When I’d like to read it, I request it. Later on, I get it and then look it over and remember why it is that I wanted it. It’s a new sort of browsing and it has let me read books I never would have read in the print-only world.

Speaking of newspapers, see this article in the Wall Street Journal - “Why Los Angeles Times Can’t Keep an Editor,” by Emily Steel (1/22/08, p.B1). We know the story. It’s a matter of budget. Seems that the publisher wanted $7 million in reductions. Ouch! o n l i n e. w s j. c o m / p u b l i c / a r t i c l e / SB120086036844103713.html?mod=blog

Forgot to tell you that the Georgetown (SC) County Library was one of five libraries in the US to receive the National Medal for Library Service given by First Lady Laura Bush and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The subscription library was started in 1908 by Miss Susan Allston. She, with the help of Mrs. Congdon and Mrs. Weston Rosa, canvassed the entire community for book donations and continuing on page 49

This library is one of the larger and better equipped libraries and is open five days a week from Tuesday to Saturday from 9:30-5pm. Everyone has free entrance with any ID. The staff of 15 includes librarians, security personnel, and custodians. The current budget for acquisitions is about USD $4,500 per year; and they do occasionally receive donations from private organizations and NGOs. The librarian indicated that many of these gifts are older materials.

The users are mostly from nearby high schools and colleges, and the library contains 220 seats. Current statistics show about 400 users per day. The collection consists of 20,000 volumes which do not circulate. The library does have growth space. Some users come in to use the collections, while others are looking for a reading room where they can use their own workbooks and textbooks.

There are seven computers with word processing only, and a small collection of juvenile materials. Almost everything is in English, with a few items in Amharic. There is a Subject and Author-Title Card Catalog for users.

We toured around the building, which is on two floors, and then visited an annex at the back. Just as Ato Tameru indicated, most of the titles I picked up appeared older and well used. The volumes I randomly chose ran from the 1974 to 1997 and dealt with architecture, Ethiopian history, and management. We visited Reference and Documents, the Periodicals Room (which only held newspaper) and three Reading Rooms. Almost all the seats were taken at about 11 A.M., and it was very, very quiet. I saw two public bathrooms, not perhaps as nice as those at home, but they did exist.

The current challenges Ato Tameru indicated to us included the problem that the city administration does not show enough interest in the library. If they did, he feels he could have more stuff and a bigger budget. Also, theft suspects about 100 titles a year are stolen. Currently, the library has no cataloger.

Other worries are that the library is unable to provide a photocopy service or Internet access. (The Head Librarian himself has no Internet access in his office). There is no children’s area, and he would really like to see one. In this compound, there is a private organization nearby that offers Internet service for a fee. I saw about 4 out of its 36 computers being used.

Our discussion included the importance of... continued on page 49
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having a good wish list to provide to possible donors. Ato Tameru indicated that textbooks for students are their main priority. I suggested stamping the books more visibly to help the security staff. Of all the library conversations we had during the one-and-a-half-hour visit, Ato Tameru became most interested in the suggestion of offering a coffee and tea service to users. I added that offering a reference service would be useful as well. He asked me to return, and I invited him to see our library as well in the near future.

Note: When I visited this same library in a different locality ten years ago, it was much more crowded as this was the only public library in the capital. Patrons came to use the library in two shifts. A bell was rung at the end of the shift and the line of people standing outside would be ushered in while the other library users were shown the door.

Academic Libraries in Addis Ababa

Academic libraries are vastly different from public libraries in Addis Ababa. For the most part, only those affiliated with the institution can enter the premises.

Addis Ababa University (AAU), for example, is the oldest institute of higher education in Ethiopia. It was founded in 1950 and has 44,000 students. There are numerous public colleges and universities spread around the highland and lowlands of Ethiopia, with various specialties from veterinary medicine to agriculture. About thirteen newly created private colleges have also sprung up in the past two years. English is the language of instruction for high schools and colleges.

Here at AAU, they report a library collection of half a million items. I wonder about this number — as it is the same number quoted ten years ago. There are eleven branch libraries scattered around the city, and the university offers all degrees including an information systems program on this campus. The main library and a few of the branches are now open 24 hours a day (as of two weeks ago) to those who live on campus. Others are not allowed in the gates.

There are computers in the main library, about seven located around the card catalog, to serve the online catalog as well. There is a small computer lab with about 12 computers reserved for graduate students. There are no printers. All staff seem to have access to a computer with Internet (when it works, which might be two to three hours a day on a good day). Of course, there are the usual brownouts during the day and night in this country, (including one just after I started typing up this document.) There is no generator for this campus. There are small computer labs scattered around the campus with from 3-20 terminals available.

In terms of online resources, the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications started a pilot program for public universities in Ethiopia about eight years ago. This program was successful and now about 15 databases are offered, mainly in the sciences. The university pays about 2% of the total database fee.

I have observed that many university faculty and students do not know these online resources exist. Once I share with them the advantages of these resources, such as full text searching, they become very enthused and begin using them.

There is only one Internet service provider — the government — and though broadband exists here at AAU, you would hardly know that. Numerous Internet cafés are found throughout the city.

There is no library consortium here as yet. There is a newly created library, archives and information systems association which was formed about a year ago and is sponsored by the British Council. In the recent past, groups such as this were met with suspicion. It was not unusual to imprison members of professional societies. I sense there is Internet censoring today, but that it has eased up very recently.

Overall, Ethiopia’s infrastructure is inadequate, and there seems to be a problem all over the country of not maintaining what already exists. This compounds the problems for everyone, including librarians trying to cope with the needs of their users and get access to the resources they need. But whatever little they do have in libraries, both Ethiopian librarians and library users seem grateful for that.