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Short Term Library Training and Consulting to Libraries in the Developing Nation of Ethiopia

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Abstract:

Libraries in Africa do indeed play a vital role in society to inform, educate and provide knowledge to users. It is a critical and essential role that libraries play in developing countries in Africa when there may not be other resources for its citizens to tap to gain information and knowledge in print or online formats.

Ethiopian libraries serve students from primary school to university level, researchers, and anyone interested in learning and having the benefits of a library's resources. After a six month library fellowship sponsored by the United States Information Agency and the American Library Association in 1997, there have been a series of small volunteer trainings and consultancies in Ethiopia over two decades continuing on to 2017.

The first Ethiopia library consultant and training was initiated at the National Library of Ethiopia and then moved on to Addis Ababa University Libraries, to university libraries in rural areas and to private libraries open to the community. These short library workshops have been offered from a time period of one month to nine months as a volunteer librarian in the Horn of Africa region during sabbaticals or shorter research leaves.

Questions of how to provide customer training, help with cataloging, library security, the Library of Congress system, book repair were some of the topics that were asked for and discussed. After the training and discussions, librarians and library staff stated they felt more encouraged and confident as they continued their role in serving library users.

Keywords:

Africa, Horn of Africa, Developing Countries, Ethiopia, Short Term Training

Introduction:

The country of Ethiopia is a landlocked land in northeastern Africa in a region referred to as the Horn of Africa. It is the only country in that continent not colonized and in 1995 held its first elections. The nation has 12 official languages and 9 regional states. Ethiopia is the only country in sub-Saharan Africa to have its own language scripts, including Geez, a language of the Ethiopian Orthodox church. Muslim documents written Arabic are also widely held in libraries. English is taught beginning in secondary school and is the language used at the university level and in all government offices. The majority of books in Ethiopian libraries is in the English language.

The theme for IFLA 2018, “Transform Libraries, Transform Societies” is a very appropriate title because libraries are so valued today in Ethiopia today. Libraries have given students and researchers the opportunity and environment to study and learn which they may not have had previously. My first six months in Ethiopia were working as a consultant at the National Library of Ethiopia (NALE) in Addis Ababa in 1997. The U.S. Embassy’s Cultural Affairs Officer had contacts with the National Library and arranged this fellowship. The last time I was in Ethiopia was in June 2017 as a volunteer librarian for a month at Addis Ababa University.

Ethiopia has an evolving society and have watched numerous changes over the years. Electricity can be off from time to time due to planned and unplanned power cuts. Internet was not readily available 20 years ago but is now found in most of the country. Water has always been problematic and makes hygiene inconvenient at times.

My work at home is as a social sciences librarian at the University of Utah’s J. Willard Marriott Library in Salt Lake City in the western state of Utah. My work responsibilities include collection development, bibliographic instruction, reference work online and in person, serving on committees at the library, university and national associations. I applied for short research leaves and applied for sabbatical time.

Over the years, I would offer libraries short term training as a volunteer librarian since that is the only time I had available in my schedule. After my initial Library Fellow experience, I would finance my own visits while on sabbaticals or research leave time to work in Ethiopia for short time periods of one month or several months. I have made ten visits to Ethiopian libraries from 1997-2017 and plan to return in the near future. I had private Amharic language so I could improve my communication with those who did not have English skills in the office, while using public transportation or when shopping.

Initial Assignment:

My first six months in Ethiopia were working as a consultant at the National Library of Ethiopia (NALE) in Addis Ababa in 1997. The U.S. Embassy’s Cultural Affairs Officer had contacts with the library and arranged this fellowship which was funded by the State Department and organized by the American Library Association. I was asked to be there as a librarian consultant by their director, who resigned about a month after I arrived.

The National Library was started by Emperor Haile Selassie in 1944 which was housed in a former hospital compound. The podium used by the Emperor to browse newspapers and

other reading material can still be seen today. Behind that is a colorful mural of the Emperor's motifs and emblems.

Every morning at NALE, a long line of people would be seen stretching out for about a block waiting for entrance. They had to have documents saying they were students or researchers from abroad with the right credentials.

For me, the reading rooms had inadequate lighting which meant people headed to the windows for natural light so they could see what they were reading. Large, dark colored draperies from the Emperor's regime still hung on the windows. The library was usually crowded and very silent. One had to whisper when talking to the staff who were the overseers of each reading room.

At NALE, I was given an orientation and tours of reference, cataloging, acquisitions, book repair, and manuscripts. Many of the staff were trained in the former Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia or East Germany and had those language skills. They asked me how things were handled in American libraries and some of what I described was of interest to them and some things were not. The staff had questions on the Dewey Decimal system, on how to approach and handle customers, how to deal with library security and book theft, and wanted to know about library policies. They were a traditional and typical library trying their best to give service to students and others. Some of the staff may have been suspicious of me being at NALE. I was asked to be there by their director, who resigned about a month after I arrived.

The National Library reported to the Minister of Information and Culture who took a great interest in my work assignments there. I met with him weekly to explain my weekly projects. The NALE staff seemed very interested in my work in the US and were very kind to me.

The basic challenge was that computers were new in Ethiopia in 1997 and not all staff had training in using them. A few computers were seen in that organization, all covered by a cloth to protect it from dust. Electricity was a huge problem some years ago and today is more reliable and stable in big cities. There was no Internet available 21 years ago at NALE except with the Information Technology department where I could try for about 30 minutes and get a connection that would last for about 2 minutes. It was a frustrating time for computer users in that country.

A different challenge at NALE was that I noticed that librarians were eager to collect materials of all types for their collections. Basic reference works, local books, as well as manuscripts were sought after. However, just like in other libraries, the staff were not eager to have users access these resources. In fact, sometimes it seemed like there were multiple obstacles placed in front of users before they could view these materials

I also focused on visiting other area libraries in the capital, Addis Ababa as well as in outlying areas. In Addis Ababa, I visited a school library where students were anxious to get their hands on their small book collections. The only public library in the capital was also popular. Users came to use it in two hour shifts. A bell would ring and the next batch of users would be ushered in. In smaller towns, many had trouble with my question of where the local library was located. Sometimes, I was taken to a place that sold newspapers as the term library was known to some, but not all Ethiopians. I was surprised to find libraries in small

towns, all similar with old resources, dimly lit rooms, no generators, often no catalogs but nice, helpful staff members.

National Library Barriers and Benefits:

Small barriers were that English skills were not always commonly found in government offices like NALE. I was glad to have some basic Amharic skills to communicate with those who preferred that.

Also, I learned in the first week of working in Ethiopia, that things moved slowly, on an Ethiopian time schedule. I was being too impatient with getting things done instead of keeping up with the new cultural sense of time.

Electricity and Internet sporadic availability did not help library staff or users at that time period. Fortunately, both have improved today.

Having a dedicated community library for users is a plus in any Ethiopian town. Books, magazines, newspapers, computers and the Internet have always attracted users. Often, students have no other place to study and read than their library.

I returned to NALE the next two years for a few weeks for follow-up visits. I felt it was then that the staff had gained some confidence in my interest in Ethiopian libraries and my work efforts.

Other Library Assignments:

A few years later in the year 2000, I was invited to the Kennedy Library at Addis Ababa University to work in the Reference Department in helping with user services and collection development.

At this library, I examined the reference collection of a few thousand volumes and found most to be fifty or sixty years old, heavily used and sometimes damaged, and inappropriate titles added to that collection. I found publisher catalogs for the staff to consult and encouraged them to draw up a wish list of preferred titles or types of materials (dictionaries). The inappropriate titles included books on golf course management when Ethiopia did not even have a golf course at that time. It was a donation and the library wanted to be friendly to the donor accepted the golf course books, for example.

It took a bit of time to explain why a library did not have to accept irrelevant book titles to their collections. If material was not relevant to the mission of the university or the library, they could pass on these donations and refer prospective donors to a wish list of their current preferences.

The staff did not have much knowledge about publishers or how to contact them. So I came up with a list of names and addresses so they could get started contacting these vendors. On my subsequent attendance of library conferences in the US or abroad, I would add the address of Addis Ababa University Library so that the companies would send catalogs to those libraries. Internet again was only used by the Information Technology department and one had to make appointments with them to use that technology.

At this time, I visited many of the Addis Ababa University library branches and also the Institute of Ethiopian Studies Library (IESL).

I worked with IESL on collection development as they had received a grant in 2008. Over a time period, I made contact with the vendor Blackwell and worked on establishing a collection development approval plan. Blackwell could make available Horn of Africa books within a certain price range with the approval of the library staff. Again, I showed the staff how to find contact information of global publishers and especially of African publishers. We also set out from time to time to area bookstores to track down Ethiopian titles of interest to the library. I was often asked to provide training on Customer Service as they saw this as an area of improvement.

I also was asked to provide the library staff with some basic cataloging skills, working with users with disabilities, reference works, academic subjects, types of reference works, and basic book repair. Services for the disabled were very popular as Addis Ababa University hosted many who were visually impaired and many who were in wheelchairs or used crutches to move around the campus.

In the evenings and weekends, I would head to Internet cafes and make lesson plans for training sessions. I also made handouts for each participant so they had something to refer to after the sessions.

In 2009, 2010, and 2012, I made month long visits to the IESL to continue with working on collection development and offered training to the library staff which sometimes had changed.

In 2014, while working with the IESL, I was asked to go to a remote area in southwest Ethiopia to the town of Jinka. The university had a small ethnographic research center and was requested to train 12 library staff from that area. It was a two day trip to arrive in the town of Jinka using a local bus on some rough roads. The research center was a neat, clean space and the library was small and served the area of 30,000 and was open to ethnographic researchers from around the world. The library had been set up by a European some years ago and the catalog was written up on large cards. That system sufficed well for the users. The trainees were enthusiastic and seemed pleased to receive some short term training on a variety of topics as previously arranged. The topics included the Dewey Decimal system, types of reference materials, an introduction to the humanities and social sciences, writing a mission statement and small book repair.

My main work at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies Library was to offer ongoing training to the staff. Usually, I did this in the mornings and then spent the afternoons with meetings with library staff and working on lesson plans.

The IESL invited me to continue training on topics like customer service and other public services work in 2015. The library staff would change from year to year, so I had a new crop of people to work with. I worked closely with the head librarian to develop lesson plans. I always had someone to interpret to make it easier for the trainees to understand.

Soon, I found that I had visited more area libraries than my Ethiopian counterparts. So I made arrangements to visit the UN Library, the African Union Library, and the National Library in

Addis Ababa. We had some beneficial discussions with those library staff and were even offered some surplus books from their collections.

During my short stays, I would visit the US Embassy library to use those books as a resource for my training or personal use. I saw the status of these collections change over the years. Today, the library is no more but a different set up. They mostly cater to high school students and offer popular magazines and some books, including test guides on a variety of subjects. I often visit these centers and let the US Embassy know what kind of work I am doing in Ethiopia. On each visit, I encouraged the US Embassy staff to visit the libraries I was working with and to possibly think of funding books for them in the future.

In February 2015, I was asked to join some US Embassy staff to celebrate Black History month.

I had done something similar back home at the University of Utah, I had served on the Martin Luther King, Jr. Committee where we organized an essay contest for high school students, brought in keynote speakers, and held cultural events such as concerts and film viewings.

At this embassy sponsored event, I was asked to accompany the staff to the towns in the eastern part of the country to Harrar and Dire Dawa. We went to their local public libraries and held essay competitions there. They were given two hours to write an essay on the theme of US Black History. The three embassy staff and I would work in the evenings reading and evaluating the essays. We then returned to the libraries to give the results and the top three were awarded electronic prizes as well. At the end of these sessions there was an informal reception and the high school aged students asked us questions.

In 2017, I was invited to visit Wollo University in the northern highlands, a 7 hour car trip from Addis Ababa. I had a meeting with the External Relations officer, the President of the campus, and other officials.

I found this ten year old university to have small libraries, such as one for social sciences, with many copies of each book title. In Ethiopia, students don't purchase textbooks, they use what their libraries offer. I also found the pre-fabricated buildings to have ceiling leaks and broken windows. I was told that in the future, more permanent and robust buildings would host the libraries. In these libraries, there were no library catalogs of any kind. Students could browse the shelves to find what they wanted.

As suggested by the librarian in charge, I provided training on customer service, reference works, and services to the disabled, and basic cataloging skills. There were over fifty people that came to these sessions over a period of a few days. One hindrance there was that not as many were comfortable with English and we did have an interpreter much of the time to help out.

Ethiopian Libraries Today, “Transform Libraries, Transform Societies”:

Today, the Internet has improved drastically and is often slow, but is widely available in Ethiopia. There are Internet cafes in virtually every big and small city in Ethiopia. Many of them have generators which can be very helpful. Nowadays, there is a good hour or two on work days when Internet can be used in Addis Ababa. I used it easily and frequently in the evenings and weekends to catch up on personal use as well as for work preparations.

In Ethiopia, and especially at that time, many homes had little or no electricity. So the preferable place to study and use books was any library. That is one reason why libraries are so beneficial to societies.

Books are more available today, but are mostly unaffordable to most people in Ethiopia. Textbooks and professional materials are highly expensive or not on the market in local bookstores. For that reason, libraries are seemed as special places where they can use computers, read, and study.

As libraries become more popular and more common in all regions of Ethiopia, they are well used by the people that they serve. More and more buildings are going up at the National Library complex, at Addis Ababa University and also around the country to accommodate the large number of users. The promise of new buildings is also heard today in conversations with librarians. So there is much to look forward to in terms of acquiring resources and delivering library services.

Summary:

Short term training has been offered over the years to libraries in Ethiopia. The staff seem to appreciate it as they don't have access to such practical and hands on learning opportunities.

The challenges of not having Internet, electricity and lack of running water caused problems at times as it could drastically slow down our work schedule.

It has been fascinating to see Ethiopian libraries being transformed over the decades as more and libraries are being built around the country. They seem to have grown at tremendous rates in the past 10-12 years. I would advocate for more professional training for library staff on topics they would like to learn more about.

It is amazing that the students and faculty do so much with so little resources for libraries in Ethiopia.

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