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Adventures in an Ethiopian Library by Marie Paiva

During my sabbatical time from mid-September 2007 to mid-March 2008, I worked as a volunteer librarian at Addis Ababa University (AAU) in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies Library (IESL) on a collection development project in Ethiopia.

Background: From contacts made over the years, I was invited to work at IESL as they had received a grant for new acquisitions. Their focus is on Horn of Africa materials. The Institute of Ethiopian Studies building is located in Ras Makonen Hall and houses a museum and library. The campus compound served as former Emperor Haile Selassie's palace in the 1950s.

My office contained a computer and printer with a huge window opening to flowers and birds. An office phone in the hall was padlocked. Since mobile phones are now readily available there, I purchased one and used that during my stay for all communication.

I commuted to work each day via two minibuses leaving my studio apartment at 7:15am. Since the shortest time it took was 45 minutes and the longest was 2.5 hours, I didn't schedule any appointments before 9am. Addis Ababa is a city full of traffic congestion, few traffic lights, heavy pollution, potholes, donkeys, stray cattle, dogs, pedestrians, sidewalk vendors with their colorful displays, big shops, little shops, markets, offices, apartments, houses, and about 10 million inhabitants.

Electricity existed amidst brownouts. The outage would last from several minutes to half a day. Internet access is difficult in Ethiopia with slow Internet connectivity for only two hours, usually in the mornings. The Ethiopian government is the only Internet service provider and it is censored. Water was another kind of problem. Public bathrooms are scarce in this country, but a few are scattered around on campus.

The first thing I did every morning was check my email to make sure it was working. Here is a sample of a few days of my week:

Monday, February 4: A technician came to help me with some computer difficulties. He sorted things out after an hour. Later, I met two colleagues for coffee at a campus café. I returned to review some University of Utah library databases to find book reviews in the humanities and social sciences. Around noon I headed to the University Staff Lounge for lunch. I picked up a plate of Ethiopian food-injera and wot (bread and stew). We sat at communal tables for our meal. I went back to the office but the Internet was no longer available. I made some phone calls and prepared a list of databases, and then visited the main library (Kennedy) to see the Head of Acquisitions. She is in charge of the database program at AAU. There are about 20 databases which are mostly donated through a non-governmental organization. This librarian wanted feedback for acquiring new databases for which AAU pays 2% of the charges

Tuesday, February 5: My two colleagues come to my office for Database Review. I had been involved with reviewing databases at the University of Utah library and our goal was to examine each database and access with colleagues. Today, we had a good discussion of what worked even though the connections were slow. I incorporated Boolean searching, truncation and nesting when needed. That afternoon, I met with my office neighbor, a history professor, to introduce the AAU databases.

Wednesday, February 6: After reading some articles on the Internet, I went upstairs to the acquisitions meeting. We had many issues to discuss such as theft, ordering materials, and finding out of print dealers for the library. In the afternoon I went to the Periodicals Library to look for a reel of microfilm (London Times). They had no microfilm reader there so I brought it back to our library to read for a patron. At 4:30pm we started our Society of Friends of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (SOFIES) meeting. Plans for the new library were discussed along with issues such as budget and museum acquisitions. At 6pm I attended the SOFIES lecture which was about the city of Gondar.

Thursday, February 7: I tried to check my email but the Internet was not working. I met a colleague to visit the National Library of Ethiopia. We would like to cooperate with them on various issues such as theft and interlibrary loan. We took a bus, minibus and walked to make our appointment. The traveling took an

hour. We met with the Director and were given a tour of their new facilities. She agreed to work with the IESL in the near future. In the afternoon, a librarian from the Kennedy Library came to see me for help in editing a document. I went upstairs to retrieve my mail and messages from the office. I also went outside the AAU to make some photocopies (cheaper and faster than at the library).

Friday, February 8: Email worked! Then I got ready for Database Review with my colleagues. After they arrived the power went off. We decided to have coffee but the power stayed off for four hours. I went to the library office to check my mail and messages. I had a brief meeting with the IESL librarian. In the afternoon I went to the Housing Administration to talk to them about the water leak which was not resolved. Later, I had an appointment with a librarian about the card catalog which needed some filing attention. We then worked out a training plan for the staff.

Summary: It was marvelous seeing what rich collections the IESL had which included some dedicated staff. Retrieving book reviews, trying to find scholarly materials from publishers, editing documents and contributing to the acquisitions meetings went well in spite of the weak infrastructure. The project in Ethiopia covered a variety of tasks and I felt as though I just got started when my sabbatical abroad was over. I look forward to continuing to work with IESL.

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About the Author:

Marie Paiva works at the University of Utah's Marriott Library in Salt Lake City. Her responsibilities include reference, collection development, and library instruction. Marie's international involvement has taken her to the Zimbabwe International Book Fair, working as a Library Fellow in Ethiopia, attending some IFLA meetings and belonging to ALA's International Relations Round Table. She can be contacted at marie.paiva@utah.edu