

# 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 and then showed us around the facility.

Public libraries in Addis Ababa are 30 years old, and the municipality moved this one to its current location four years ago... The actual building was constructed about 75 years ago and belonged to a well off individual. It is a solid stone building with an intricate inlaid woodwork interior, and large windows with security grates. It sits in a shaded compound full of trees, bushes, flowers and a few benches off of a major road in Addis Ababa.

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 ranged in date from 1974 to 1997 and dealt with ar-

chitecture, 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 staff and a bigger budget. Also, theft is a problem everywhere, and **Ato Tameru** 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 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 three 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 ag-

riculture. 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

*continued on page 42*

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. 🌱

## against the grain people profile

Associate Librarian, University of Utah  
Institute of Ethiopian Studies Library, Addis Ababa University  
P.O. Box 1176, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia  
<marie.paiva@utah.edu>

### Marie Paiva

**BORN & LIVED:** Sri Lanka.

**EARLY LIFE:** Colombo, Boston, St. Louis, Queens, NY, Manila.

**EDUCATION:** Anthropology (BA & MA), Library Science (MA).

**VOLUNTEER:** Utah Museum of Natural History.

**FIRST REAL JOB:** Camp Counselor, NYC.

**PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES:** Worked here and there mostly in library public services. ULA, ALA, MPLA, when I can afford it: IFLA, Zimbabwe Library Association.

**IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO:** Travel and explore natural history, read, hike, see independent films, listen to music.

**FAVORITE BEVERAGE:** Ethiopian coffee.

**FAVORITE SPORTS TEAM:** Utes.

**FAVORITE TREE:** Baobab.

**FAVORITE ANIMAL:** Black Lion.

**FAVORITE FLOWER:** Frangipani.

**FAVORITE PET:** Little brown bat (Alexandra).

**FAVORITE BOOKS:** (Genres) mostly non-fiction (travel, anthropology, natural history), humor, cookbooks.

**PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD:** War and the current US govt.; Greedy publishers or anything else like that.

**PHILOSOPHY:** Be proactive in life. Librarians everywhere need to keep fighting for intellectual freedom, ask for equal access to information in all parts of the globe, and not take things for granted or be wasteful with resources they have.

**MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT:** Opportunity to work with a variety of library staff in different work situations and meeting interesting and skilled people; learning new things and sharing with one another.

**GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW:** Travel to other continents.

**HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS:** In the "developed" world, we will still have libraries but the way information is produced and delivered may continue to change by western vendors. Users will ask for more and hopefully libraries can deliver that and more and be proactive. In the "developing" world, libraries are fast trying to catch up and stay afloat. Let us try and get resources to all countries on the map so that the information divide is not as evident. We cannot depend on world "leaders" to do that and so librarians, through their professional activities can perhaps assist with providing equal access to information resources fairly. 🌱