

Towards the librarianship of scarcity: some recent trends in Ethiopia

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One enterprise in Ethiopia is Books-by-Mail, a project of the University Libraries with financial assistance from the Ministry of Education. The programme was originally the brainchild of *Woizero* Selamawit Wolde Amanuel and Robert Jordan, then Associate University Librarian and a longtime advocate of direct delivery systems.¹ In a typical—and disastrous—pattern of development, the country's two major library networks (national and university) are both located in the capital, as are something like 60% of all other libraries.² The Books-by-Mail project started as an attempt to provide a service for university students, who must spend one year teaching or working in rural areas as part of their course requirements. Under the supervision of *Woizero* Selamawit, who spent three months in the UK studying direct delivery techniques, the programme has now expanded to serve teachers in government high schools in rural areas. Many of the books and journals were donated by various embassies to the programme, which has attempted to maintain a careful balance between materials from the capitalist and the socialist countries. The emphasis is on writing by Africans about Africa, especially Ethiopia, and on teach-yourself manuals of practical value in the countryside. The programme publishes a 40-page catalogue, which is sent out at the beginning of the year with a supply of request cards, which are mailed back by the reader. Books-by-Mail, incidentally, holds the Ethiopian post office's first Business Reply Licence, so readers do not even have to buy stamps.

Ethiopia's ruling Provisional Military Administrative Council (the *Derg*) has closed the university and the high schools this year in order to mount a *Zemetcha*—or Crusade—in the countryside. The objectives of the Crusade are to teach the people about public health and inexpensive agricultural technology, to instil the ideology of "Ethiopia First", and to bring literacy to the masses. The Ethiopian Library Association and the University Libraries have set up a joint committee to study possible ways in which librarians in Ethiopia can work in the campaign. Several suggestions have been put forward. The Crusade will operate through a network of 55 centres, coordinating the work of some 600 subordinate units throughout the country's fourteen provinces. The Joint Committee would like to see each of the 55 centres designated for receipt of a core collection of perhaps 1,000 volumes, as the beginning of a national public library network to provide follow-up materials for the literacy campaign. Clearly, almost all this material will be in Amharic, but since English is the language of instruction from Grade 7 onwards a few foreign reference tools may be provided. If, and it is still highly doubtful, this library programme is put into effect, it will be the first systematic attempt to set up a nationwide public library service, rather than relying on haphazard local initiatives. Recommendations to this effect were first made over five years ago, but no serious action was ever taken.³

Another project, at first glance one which contradicts the principles of self-reliance, is the current computerisation of the university library's Periodicals Department. The university library system receives about 4,000 serials, and has for several years participated in the compilation of a union list for eastern Africa published by the University of West Virginia in the United States.⁴ The University of Nairobi has already produced its own computer list locally, and Haile Sellassie I University is following its example. The rationale for this project is simple: by moving carefully, step by step, into the

employment of computers, which are underutilised in Ethiopia, skilled staff will be released from routine tasks and will be able to adopt a more aggressive attitude towards outreach services for readers.

The two most important organisations in Ethiopian librarianship are undoubtedly the University Libraries and the Ethiopian Library Association. The University now employs eleven Ethiopian post graduate professionals; it also runs the diploma programme which produces the para-professionals who work in the country's special and government libraries. This gives the university and its professional staff, the majority of whom are Ethiopians trained abroad, considerable influence over the development of librarianship, particularly since the executive committee of the ELA has always, up till now, been dominated by the university's professionals. The ELA *Bulletin* is the only professional journal in the country, and the majority of its contributions come from the university.⁵ The disadvantages of this situation are too heavy a concentration on tertiary education and on the problems of organising large and expensive networks —both largely irrelevant for the majority of Ethiopia's practising school and special librarians. The main advantage is that the effective leadership of the profession is concentrated in the hands of a small group of Ethiopian graduates who know each other well and can present a forceful and consensual case for library development to the government agencies which control the purse-strings.

1. Jordan, Robert, *Tomorrow's library: direct access and delivery*, New York, 1970.
2. Amos, Geraldine, comp., *Directory of Ethiopian libraries*, Addis Ababa, 1968.
3. Paton, W. B., *Ethiopia: development of public and school libraries*, Paris, 1969. (UNESCO document no. 1110/BMS.RD/DBA.)
4. *Periodicals in East African libraries: a union list*. 7th ed. Morgantown, West Virginia, 1972.
5. Subscription information may be had from the Secretary of the ELA, Woizero Asrat Tilahun, c/o University Libraries, P.O. Box 1176, Addis Ababa.

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