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Joan Petit

Portland State University, jpetit@pdx.edu

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Citation Details

Petit, Joan. "An American Librarian in Ethiopia." *International Leads* 31.2 (June 2017): 8-9.

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An American Librarian in Ethiopia

By Joan Petit
jpetit@pdx.edu
Portland State University in Oregon

Over the past year, while on sabbatical from my position at Portland State University Library, I have had the extraordinary privilege of serving as a Fulbright Scholar in Ethiopia. Here I am based in the Department of Information Science at Jimma University in the town of Jimma, a regional capital with a population of about 200,000 and a major center for coffee production. My primary responsibility has been teaching three classes to first-year Information Science graduate students, a group of 18 bright students whose aspirations include earning PhDs, teaching, and working in libraries. As well I have traveled to other campuses to give guest lectures on librarianship, open access, and open educational resources and participated in programs at the Jimma public library.

My family and I arrived last September, just a few weeks before protests throughout the country disrupted daily life and delayed the start of classes. While my family was never in danger, the political and social upheaval created a great deal of tension and uncertainty. As part of a draconian State of Emergency, the government, which runs telecommunications, limited social media access and, for several months, cut off internet access via mobile phone. Bandwidth is quite limited at the best of times in Ethiopia; without mobile data, the only way to access email and the internet was on a

university campus (limited to students, staff, and faculty only) or at a hotel restaurant (prohibitively expensive for most Ethiopians). After a few weeks of delay, in late October I began teaching Advanced Information Science. Higher education in Ethiopia is in English, so we used a British textbook supplemented by articles relevant to Ethiopian library and information science. Over the next several months I also taught Research Methods, using an open textbook from the Open Textbook Network, and Advanced Management, using an American textbook. With the exception of the online textbook, I brought my classroom materials with me from the United States.

This wasn't my first experience as a classroom instructor—in the past I have taught first year writing as well as semester-long information literacy classes—but it was certainly my first time teaching graduate students in library and information science. The department shared syllabi with me and encouraged me to update them and add my insights and experience; I spent hours reading textbooks and articles and preparing lectures and assignments. I learned a great deal about teaching with every class, and, as well, I learned a great deal about librarianship. I received my MSLS in 2006 and have worked in libraries since 2004, but teaching these topics renewed my appreciation for our field and its principles.

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First-year Information Science graduate students at Jimma University in Ethiopia

Ethiopia, continued

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Ethiopia is one of the world's oldest countries, with a manuscript tradition centered on the Ethiopian Orthodox church and dating back centuries. Ethiopia is also one of the world's poorest countries, with a literacy rate of only about 40% and no real culture of reading. But in recent years the economy has been booming, and the government has been making significant investments in higher education. In the late 1990s, Ethiopia had 20,000 students on two campuses; today there are more than 780,000 students on dozens of campuses throughout the country.



Image from CIA World Fact Book 2017

Jimma University, my home base, has 50,000 students and counting. With this growth comes opportunity for young Ethiopians but also significant challenges for universities, especially in regards to staffing classrooms with qualified instructors. Currently there are no PhD programs in information or library science in Ethiopia; BS and MS classes are taught primarily by instructors with master's degrees, supplemented by expat instructors from India, Nigeria, the Philippines, and elsewhere.

The chair of my department, Samuel Sisay, shared with me that, at 30 years of age, he's the oldest Ethiopian in our department.

I first met Samuel via email. Two years ago, recently tenured and anticipating a sabbatical, I contacted a few different Ethiopian universities, hoping to garner an invitation to join their faculty for a year as part of my Fulbright application. Samuel was enthusiastic about welcoming an experienced librarian to teach.

My students come from throughout Ethiopia. Many have worked as teachers and in libraries; about half are working full time at the university while enrolled in grad school.

My professional life in Ethiopia has been quite fulfilling. Daily living, however, can be a challenge, especially given the frequent power and water outages. My family lives in a well-constructed five-bedroom home, newer and nicer than our house in the US and only a ten-minute walk from my office. Yet, we also have two barrels of water outside for the days when the water doesn't run in the tap. As well, because of the protests and safety concerns last fall, we haven't been able to travel as much as we hoped. But still we've seen a lot including the extraordinary rock-hewn churches of Lalibela in the north of the country and the birds and hippos on lovely Lake Hawassa in southern Ethiopia's Rift Valley.



Image from CIA World Fact Book 2017

Most Fulbright Scholars are traditional teaching faculty with PhDs, but I would encourage any American librarian interested in spending time overseas to review the awards catalog and requirements and consider applying. It's been an incredible privilege to live in Ethiopia and teach this country's future library leaders.

Joan Petit is Associate Professor and Communications and Outreach Librarian at Portland State University in Oregon.

