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DECEMBER 2017

Axum, Ethiopia Fulbright 2017

Problem/chigger/ቸግር

by Janet Lee

Just when things seem to be running smoothly, disruptions occur and all planning, promises, schedules, communication fly out the window. The first hint I had of trouble ahead was when a colleague and I went to tea. He said something about football, protests, the Academic Vice President, meetings on campus with students. It really didn't make sense. Students protest all of the time. Later when I caught the shuttle from campus, another colleague whispered to me about trouble with students. Once again the mention of protests and football. But there didn't really seem to be a call of alarm.

That evening I received a call from the Embassy. Apparently I had been left off of an important email the day prior and she needed to update me on the situation. A student had been killed in nearby Adigrat. I learned later that it might have been after two rival football teams met and the student killed was not from this region. This sparked protests nationwide causing many college campuses to be closed, Aksum University where I am working not being one of them. I assured her that I was safe and that there was no cause for alarm. Still, she wanted me to stay close to town, avoid large crowds and keep in touch. I then contacted one of the

Ex-pat faculty and later the Academic Vice President and was told that classes and exams were to be held on schedule.

The next day I heard that a student from Axum had been killed at a university in the south. His funeral was that day, explaining the heavy presence of military at my pick up spot, the university, and around town. Once the funeral was over, the military presence decreased, although there is still military on campus. Classes continued. Exams continued. I walked to and from the foundation library as if were any other day.

The contact from the Embassy sent a couple of email updates, but I didn't have access to email for several days. The government shut down all social media, including Facebook and Twitter, as well as data plans to access the internet on the go. Hotels, internet centers, and the university had limited access. Social media is shut down to this day. Since the government controls access to the internet, it is a simple process to shut down everything, the logic being that Facebook and Twitter are prone to distributing not only news, but rumors, causing more alarm, disruption, and loss of life. To reiterate, I never felt unsafe. But the loss of Facebook and the data plan was

stressful. There are workarounds for social media, but none for the data plan. The last time the government shut down social media, it lasted for several months. This is definitely impeding my productivity and I understand that the country is losing \$3.5M per day.

By chance, Regis University's Office of Diversity had chosen John Lewis' book, *Across that Bridge: A Vision for Change and the Future of America*, as its all university/one book selection. Lewis' comments about racial/ethnic strife were so appropriate to the situation at hand, the optimism for the future, and the role of peaceful/nonviolent protests and demonstrations. It should be required reading here as well.

Christmas (Maligayang Pasko, Tagalog for Merry Christmas) and New Year's Eve

Ethiopian Christmas (Gena ፲፩) is celebrated on January 7th and the New Year was celebrated on September 11th this past year.

Imagine my surprise when I entered the lobby of the Sabeen International Hotel to see the hotel staff decorating a tree on December 23rd for its international visitors. All of the hotel staff wanted photos with me in front of the tree. And of course, I went to the photo shop and had prints made for each.



Not to let a couple of good holiday celebrations pass us by, Jeremy (Peace Corps Volunteer) and I joined with the Filipino faculty in celebrating both western Christmas and New Year's together. What started out as about a half dozen of us grew to a much larger group as we were joined by other nearby PCVs and a couple of South Koreans and Ethiopians thrown in. A few years ago, the Filipinos roasted a whole pig on a spit. This year, they live in a condominium and had to improvise.



In trying not to offend Ethiopian sensibilities, I took care not to post pictures or mention the pig, since pork is a prohibited food in many religions. With the advent of a high population of Chinese, live pigs are available for purchase in some areas and we did purchase a pig from a farm. The pig was transported a couple of times by Bajaj to its final destination at the condominium. Cleof did the deed in the shower and it was butchered and hair removed on the balcony.

We actually celebrated on the Saturday before because Christmas Day was a workday. We cooked the entire day: Lechon, lumpia, pancit, and menudo. I didn't know there were so many ways to cook pork. Good food, good company, and leftovers galore. Repeated the next weekend for New Year's (without the pig).



Aksum University (አክሱም ዩኒቨርሲቲ) Updates

The Koha software for the library catalog was successfully loaded, but there have been many issues related to the configuration. We have contacted other libraries that have successfully installed and implemented the software and the administration is willing to bring in an expert from Adama Science and Technology University. This was expedited because of my visit to Adama eighteen months ago where I had an opportunity to meet the library director. I am feeling positive that we can get the catalog up and running before the end of the year.

A major event on campus was the National Development through Research, Knowledge, and Technology Transfer conference. I have volunteered to help with editing final papers and proceedings. This was the first time this conference has been held and it was quite successful. There were 26 papers selected for presentation over a two-day period of time. It was also an opportunity for me to meet with the faculty at the university, which I have found to be somewhat difficult. I have been asked to help with the processing of abstracts prior to the national conference to be held in a month's time. In the meantime, I was approached by a faculty member, Tsegaye Mekuria, who has tentatively had a paper accepted for a journal, "Crop Production" with the advice to have a

colleague whose first language is English to review, which I was most willing to do.

The highlight of the conference was an unscheduled visit by Dr. Ephriam Issac, who lectured on peace with a special focus on the current conflict in Ethiopia, a conflict not of ethnicity, which is often blamed, but to a way of thinking. Dr. Issac speaks 17 different languages, but delivered this one in Amharic. I probably understood about 25 percent of it, but I could tell that he had inspired the audience.

Dr. Isaac has multiple degrees including a Ph.D. in Near Eastern Languages from Harvard University. He founded the Afro-American Studies Program at Harvard. He led the National Literacy Campaign in Ethiopia in the 1960s and is a prolific author. His hallmark is the wearing of traditional Ethiopian attire.

I found his presentation fascinating (the 25% that I understood) and was fortunate to have bumped into him at the hotel in the reception area and let him know in person. He was genuinely grateful.



Axumite Heritage Foundation Library (ጌት መጻሕፍት)

There has been great progress in both the physical functions of the library as well as the collections. We have completed the classification (in the Dewey Decimal system) of several major collection of Ethiopian and African nature. These still need to be labeled, stamped, and accessioned and then they will be shelved in the new Ethiopia room.



We are beginning the process of deciding how to transfer the collection from the old building to the new building and then doing a “soft” opening of the library functions to the public. We are seeking counsel on internet capability and have been advised by Ethionet that installation will occur shortly.

The theatre seating in the auditorium is completely installed. It will need to be thoroughly cleaned before the opening.



The grounds look spectacular. Paving stones have been placed for walkways, roadways, and parking. The curbs outlining the transit ways were poured individually in place, saving costs in time and money. I cannot begin to imagine the number of stones that have been placed. Next steps will be to start planting when the season is optimal. It is cool here at night but very hot during the day. Think Colorado in July.



We are confronting a mold outbreak on the book collection and taking steps to both

treat and prevent. As dry as it is here, I don’t understand why the mold is growing so rampantly, but we are doing what we can to remedy the situation.

Amharic (አማርኛ)

One of my personal goals for these ten months is to improve my spoken Amharic and to master the Fidel (ፊደል). I have hired a tutor, primarily to perfect my pronunciation and have brought a number of tapes and books to aid in instruction. My focus these first four months have been on the script and the written language, while still trying to improve my vocabulary. I think it is finally starting to click. I sometimes feel like I am Helen Keller in the “Miracle Worker” when she learned how to sign “water” under the water pump. It is slow going, but I am making improvements and I have six months to go. The spoken acquisition is not going as well because the language of the region is Tigrigna, and not Amharic. But Amharic will bode me better when I return to Denver.

Coming up in January

Gena (ገና). Will be celebrated on January 7th. It is primarily a religious holiday, without the glimmer of lights, trees, and presents, although I did see a couple of Christmas trees out for sale. Timkat or Epiphany will be celebrated on January 19. In Denver, Denver Sister Cities celebrates Timkat, avoiding the Sunday of the Super Bowl. It is usually a big holiday here because of the Queen of Sheba baths just outside of town.

Hopefully, the paving of the pathways at the Foundation will be completed, internet installed, and the collection moved. It should prove to be a busy month.

Special note:

Every Saturday, there is a basket market in the plaza across from the library.

