Anita Keizers

LIBRARIES IN EGYPT AND LIBRARIANSHIP AS A CAREER

Dear colleagues, in this lecture I would like to give you a general picture about libraries in Egypt and the increasing importance of librarianship in that country.

Libraries have existed in Egypt from as far back as Pharaonic times, indeed Egypt has always been one of the cultural and intellectual centers in that region. The reason for the existence of libraries has always been the same: the preservation and conservation of culture, storage of intellectual material and the fulfillment of the information needs. The material used for writing has changed a lot of course (from reliefs and inscriptions on stone to papyrus to paper) and of course informational needs were minimal in Pharaonic, Coptic and early Islamic times compared to those of today.

Public and academic libraries in Egypt slowly emerged from mosque and private book collections (a mosque was a teaching institution as well as a place of worship). The introduction of paper, in the 8th century, and of the printing press, at Bulaq in 1821, where the first book was printed in 1822, had their respective important roles in the development of book production and libraries. The national library, founded in 1870 under the minister of education Ali Mubarak and called the Khedival Library at that time, is till today the main library for Cairo (with more than 2.1 million titles). It is also a legal deposit for all publications printed in Egypt and has published a national bibliography since 1956. Their most important collections consists of fifty thousand manuscripts.

Over the past 20 years many libraries have been established (especially in the last years under the constant stimulation from Mrs. Suzan Mubarak and her "Reading for all" campaign). Existing libraries have improved a lot. This holds true for both popular areas and more prestigious suburbs. In rural areas the aim is primarily to reduce illiteracy and educate villagers. The latest public library to be opened in June 2002 is that of el-Maadi. This will function mainly as a cultural center with various cultural activities, as is the case for many of the libraries. Some of these recently opened libraries (such as Greater Cairo Library and the Mubarak Library) are more of a prestigious project. This is evident in the fact that they are very well-funded and well-equipped with all the technology and media necessary for a modern library.

But happily enough not all the energy and money is put into these projects alone. Public and national libraries (amongst which mosques, youth libraries, cultural and information centres) have also become numerous as well as school- and university libraries.

Many international organizations, NGO¹s and institutions have funded research libraries in recent years beside the already long time existing libraries in foreign institutes. Of course Bibliotheca Alexandrina should be mentioned here, founded with international cooperation and funding from the UNESCO. The official opening was supposed to take place the 23rd April 2002. This has been postponed most recently due to the political situation in Palestine. Amongst its many projected departments we can mention the Rare Book department (5000 manuscripts of the Municipal Library of Alexandria), the planetarium, the archaeological museum and the conference hall. The electronic library for blind people where Arabic is transformed to braille is unique in the Arab world.

A very promising development for all these libraries is that, since 1995, weekly lessons on library use have been given to primary through to preparatory and secondary school students. In the long term this will have a good effect.

The role public libraries play in the life of people could expand, especially because books are still considered a luxury that most people cannot afford. In an attempt to help change this situation the General Book Organization has just started publishing a cheap series called "maktabat al-usra" (the family library). This might stimulate people to buy a book every now and then.

The expansion of the role mentioned above is sometimes hampered by incidents of official requests to libraries to remove certain tittles from the shelves. Nowadays such views of denying the public access to written materials on religious, political or sexual basis are increasingly less popular worldwide.

A directory of national libraries was published in 1997 by "The Cabinet" Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC), also available on the web. The 3rd edition (published in 2000) contains 1780 registered libraries. IDSC is

still gathering new information on more libraries, so the next edition will contain even more.

These 1780 libraries can be divided as follows:
1124   public and national
406   special (ministries, governmental agencies, research   centers)
250   academic (universities, faculties, higher institutes)
About 450 of them are in Greater Cairo (Cairo, al-Giza and al-Qalyubiyya), amongst which is the National library.

Beside this there are about 15000 school libraries spread over the different governorates, their size might differ enormously though. In summer these libraries function as public libraries.

A recently revived phenomenon in Egyptian society is the mobile library. This was first organized by the National Library in the 1950s but recently more energy was put into this activity. Busses cross Egypt and give people, especially in the less privileged areas or at youth centers, the chance to use a library.

Until now most of the libraries have used traditional methods to manage their collections. Few are automated, though there is an increasing trend in this direction. Card catalogues or handwritten lists are still in the majority. The most widespread classification system is the Dewey Decimal Classification, in original or translated and adapted versions (85%), beside the systems of the Library of Congress and local classification systems (or foreign classification systems for international libraries). Adaptations in these systems are usually in the field of religion, e.g. Islam and Arabic literature. Cairo University, for example, uses both systems.

Where does the money come from? The Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Social Affairs and the governorates assign budgets to Public and National libraries. The budget for school libraries is collected from the students in the beginning of the year (1 LE per student). Because public funds are small, budgets for public libraries usually depend on donations from the state or other parties. University libraries get at least 30.000 Egyptian pounds from the government, depending on the faculties (medicine eg. gets the most).

Collection development through acquisition policies is not so common. The Ministry of Education supplies regular lists for librarians to select from for their libraries. The result of this is that many libraries have the same collection. For school libraries teachers might make requests also. In general we can say that collections are poor and lacking more recent works. For foreign publications most libraries depend on the International Bookfair in January, to buy new material.
International libraries are, in general, better equipped than national libraries. The availability of material in foreign (non-Arabic) languages makes these libraries very attractive to the Egyptian public.

Concerning personnel we can say that most libraries have a shortage of qualified librarians and information specialists. According to IDSC about 12000 librarians are working in libraries (of whom ca. 1300 have a university degree while the rest lack formal qualifications).
Usually there are 1 or 2 qualified librarians (a senior librarian graduated from university) and 1 or more assistant librarians beside unqualified technical and support staff. One can say in general that public libraries are overstaffed with people who have little specialized knowledge about the library (The National library has ca. 1700 employees and only a small number of this huge staff has a library science degree; Cairo University library has ca. 500 staff members). Management is mostly in the hands of professional managers, who are rarely if ever trained in librarianship.

The recent introduction of modern information technologies, such as automated bibliographic systems, computer catalogues and library networks, requires specialized people who can work with specific library programs. Education and training of librarians and information specialists should be based on this development. In 1997 there were 136 computerized libraries, by 2000 that has risen to 276.
The library departments of the Egyptian universities are doing their best to deliver enough competent librarians and information specialists yearly who are able to respond to the needs of the job market, but it is a difficult task.

The need for qualified librarians is of course stronger in better-funded libraries which possess modern equipment as computers, audio-visual material, CD-Roms and online connections. The job requirements will be more specific than in poorly funded and badly equipped public libraries. Also quality management will be stricter here.

What can we say about the education in library and information science? Library specialization has been in place for 50 years in Egypt. Librarians are educated in the different faculties in Egyptian universities. There are no professional institutes for training librarians.

Since the 1990s more students study library information and graduate. In the 1960s there were yearly about 50-100 graduates, at that time Cairo University had the only library department.

In 2000 the number of graduates amounts to between 2000 and 2500 yearly.

First the library departments had 2 branches: library and archives; now it has 3 because information science was included.

Egypt has 14 state university departments for formal library and information education, at the under- and post-graduate level. Cairo University is the first and biggest (opened in 1951), after this came Alexandria (1981) and the others (Beni Sweif (a branch of Cairo University), Minufiyya, Helwan (2 departments), Tanta, Ayn Shams, Asyut, Benha, Minya). Beside these the new private university of 6th October has founded a department and the Azhar University has two departments, in Cairo (Heliopolis) and Shebin al-Kom.

Library science entry requirements usually stipulate that students should have at least 2 foreign languages and a percentage of 70% at the secondary school diploma, which is rather high compared to other studies.

Most librarians who graduate from these colleges find a job. Today the ratio of women and men taking this kind of education is evenly balanced, in the early years it was mainly men. What makes the job not too attractive though is that salaries are low. In general one can say that an average salary for an experienced qualified librarian in a government library is about 300-400 Egyptian pounds (which is 75-100 Euro) monthly, as generally the case for government salaries. Private libraries give better salaries.

It is essential for librarians to cooperate and network among themselves as we all know, which is why we are all here. The Egyptian Library Association was founded in 1944. In 2000 it was re-titled the Egyptian Library and Information Association. The aim of the Association is to improve cooperation, promote libraries and the library profession in the broadest sense and to improve professional standards of librarianship. Since 1995 a more active attitude is developed under the chairmanship of Dr. Sha¹ban Khalifa and the board of the new energetic Association. Although a lot of work still has to be done by volunteers, both at the management level, as well as the practical tasks to be fulfilled.

The Association publishes a newsletter and publications in the field of library science, e.g. a Directory for International Libraries. It organizes seminars for members and, since 1997, an annual conference in a different location in the country around a central theme. The 6th annual conference was held in Bibliotheca Alexandrina in March 2002 before the official opening; the theme was "The new Bibliotheca Alexandrina: Façade of Egypt on the World". There are further cultural activities throughout the year for the members: lectures, iftar/breakfast in Ramadan, trips, activities during the International Bookfair etc. The association has 14 subcommittees for different subjects as international libraries, national libraries, bibliographic committee etc.

The Association is a member of the International Federation of Library Associations and of the Arab Federation of Library and Information (founded in 1986).

A syndicate for librarians was founded recently and the People¹s Assembly approved the establishment; it is now just a matter of waiting for the final approval of the prime minister and the cabinet.

Training courses are given for librarians in general; whether job-related, such as cataloging, automation or acquisition policies, or not-job-related, as public relation (for members of the association these courses are cheaper). This is on request of institutions or individual members of the Association.

If new libraries are founded, the Association often functions as an advisory committee guiding acquisition policy. The latest plan is to establish a specialized library for the Association, but as it is dependant on funding, it could still take some time before this goal is realized.

According to the Association the number of registered librarians has risen from 300 members in 1995 to 8000 in 2002 (this includes both qualified and non-qualified librarians).

Indeed Egypt is just one of the countries in Middle East working on improving libraries. One can see this in the annual conferences organized by the AFLI (Arab Federation of Library and Information) with many lectures dealing with automation and modern media in Arabic libraries. Cooperation between different countries and exchange of information has also become a common feature.

I would like to mention one other aspect which makes library work different in Egypt, which is the physical preservation of collection (also electronical sources). This task requires, due to special circumstances in Egypt as compared to other countries, an enormous effort. It is for instance impossible to keep books free of dust for some time. To make this more obvious: every summer the relatively small library of the Netherlands-Flemish Institute is cleaned (ca. 10.000 titles), but I can tell you it takes a lot of time and effort. How would this be then for the National Library with its 2 million titles?

The physical environment also has an effect on the number of visitors for the location of the library and the accessibility are important. The solution would be online connections with libraries, but for many libraries this is still a distant dream, network access is still not a part of the infrastructure of most libraries.

In conclusion we could say that the general situation and the future of libraries and librarians in Egypt has become more promising than some years ago, but it could still become better.

Anita Keizers (Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo)
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