

INTERVIEW

with *Mr. Yohannes Gebregeorgis*,
librarian and author, founder of *Ethiopia Reads*
to *Eva Semertzaki*, editor *Synergasia*

The 8th Thessaloniki Book Fair held on May 5-8, 2011 was organized by the National Book Center of Greece (EKEBI) and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. During the Book Fair a rich program was deployed, including authors from the Middle East and other countries. Among the authors invited was Mr. Yohannes Gebregeorgis, librarian and author who delivered a speech titled: “*Book and education: what has to change*”, on May 8, 2011. He also had a discussion with the writer Mr. Evgenios Trivizas on May 7, 2011. Mr. Gebregeorgis is well known for the *donkey-mobile libraries* he has established in Ethiopia.

When I read his name on the program of the Book Fair, I talked to Mrs. Magda Tsoumi, librarian at the EKEBI library and member of the Committee for the Support of Libraries about my idea to arrange an interview with Mr. Gebregeorgis. Magda discussed the idea with Mrs. Catherine Velissari, Director of the EKEBI and Mrs. Mary Bairaktari who made the contacts with the invited speaker. Now we have the pleasure to ‘talk’ with Mr. Gebregeorgis in the current interview conducted by email.

ES. Mr. Gebregeorgis, I would like to express my gratitude for accepting the invitation for an email interview. In 2008 I had read about your achievements when you were named one of the Top 10 Heroes by CNN. The argument behind the distinction was the creation of the donkey-mobile libraries in Ethiopia, your home country. Could you describe us how you conceived this innovative idea and how you succeeded with these libraries?

YG. The DONKEY MOBILE LIBRARY idea was simple. In the US and the West book mobiles (buses) are used to deliver books to schools and neighborhoods that do not have libraries. I’ve also known that in different countries different methods have been employed to deliver books to communities. I asked myself how we in Ethiopia can deliver books to children in rural areas and in parts of cities where there is no access to books. There are plenty of donkeys in Ethiopia (the second country after China with the most donkeys in the world), especially in and around Awassa where I was living at the time. You could see donkeys doing all kinds of work. I said what if we can use donkeys to pull some kind of a shelf unit. I made a sketch of what this unit would look like and took it to a metal engineer who made the perfect cart and shelf unit. We had

the cart painted with logos and animals to represent the rural life. The first DONKEY MOBILE LIBRARY was launched in January 2005.

The DONKEY MOBILE LIBRARY was a success instantly. We paraded the DONKEY MOBILE LIBRARY in the main streets of Awassa. We also made one female donkey a queen and named her QUEEN HELINA, the queen of all donkeys of Ethiopia. Queen Helina led the procession dressed in royal donkey gown and a crown with a man holding an umbrella on her royal head. This was spectacular as people came out to view this parade with thousands of children following the procession chanting 'QUEEN HELINA GIVE US BOOKS! The whole procession was led by two police motorcycle clearing the way. This was a major coup for promoting reading and literacy. The DONKEY MOBILE LIBRARY was also very practical as several hundred children gathered under a tree everyday to read and to be read to. Adults from the neighborhoods sat around and watched and listened. It is open and free. THE DONKEY MOBILE LIBRARY served more children than the reading center we established in the town earlier.

ES. While preparing this interview I sought information about your interesting life and your desire to increase literacy among children in your country. What were the difficulties you encountered before taking the decision to request asylum in the USA?

YG. The difficulties were many. Becoming a refugee and a STATELESS person was traumatic. Adjusting to life in an alien culture, working and living and going to school all had their share of difficulties. Culture shock! And the shock still persists.

ES. How did you decide to study for a Master's degree in Library Science given that you had studied Pharmaceutics in Ethiopia?

YG. I never liked pharmacy work. It's mostly shop keeping. I had the desire to grow intellectually. Books have changed my life. Reading has helped me cope with the challenges of life. I wanted to be with books and that is how I chose to study library and information science. You are always dealing with knowledge and information. Library work is dynamic and the human and intellectual interaction is gratifying. Pharmacy work has no intellectual stimulation. It's dull and boring.

ES. You have set up a nonprofit organization known as "Ethiopia Reads." How could you manage to launch the organization and how difficult or easy was to persuade others to join it?

YG. The process of setting up the non profit organization was not easy. It took me a few years. It was very difficult to find people to join the organization. First we'd only names, since it was a requirement. Later on I found some people who believed in the cause and supported it.

ES. You are also an author of children's books. What is the challenge for an author to write for a potential audience which is not that big? What does it make you insist on writing for children?

YG. The idea of writing for children came out of necessity. There were no children's books for Ethiopian children. It's this necessity that prompted me to write. Children have to read, especially stories from their own culture and heritage. There were no such books for Ethiopian children. I've attempted to publish a few but it's so difficult to publish as costs are high. I've several unpublished books.

ES. With Ethiopia Reads you are a pioneer to provide children the opportunity to learn the love of reading and to increase literacy in the entire nation. Which are your vision, goals, and plans about this challenged innovation and what do you anticipate from this program?

YG. It's very unfortunate and sad to say that I'm no longer part of Ethiopia Reads, the organization I founded and worked for many years with many battles fought to promote reading and literacy. The organization was STOLEN from me and I was kicked out by a renegade board because of severe philosophical differences I'd with the president. My vision, goal and plan to help elevate literacy in my country has been usurped by a RACIST and patronizing board. It's a long story!

ES. You have invented the donkey-mobile libraries but also you set up children's libraries and public libraries in your country. How do children react and how do they accept the picture of a donkey that is carrying a cart with books? Have you seen improvements in the level of literacy of children since the establishment of your libraries?

YG. Thousands of children have flocked into the libraries I established. Children who first came to our library didn't even know what a library was. They were asking each other "what is a library?" Children were holding books upside down. These are school children but never saw a library or a book except maybe textbooks which are not also available for everyone.

There was considerable change in children who came to library. Their spirits were raised, their attitude to life changed, their grades in school improved. Most of all they loved the stories they read. Some became STAR READERS. Some have now gone to college and their reading will help them cope with their studies. There has been a growing movement in literacy since I started advocating reading. We'd held the first ever children's march to parliament. We'd the annual ETHIOPIAN CHILDREN'S BOOK WEEK. We'd a book **marathon**, children's book prize etc., which has positively impacted Ethiopian society. Millions of people have heard my radio and television interviews where I have asked parents to buy books for their children, read to them and read with them. You can notice the effects of all these efforts.

ES. Do you have any plans about the sustainability of the libraries you have founded? How do you operate them as regards services, staff and collections?

YG. I've neither access nor information as to what has happened to the libraries I established since I was fired from the organization a year ago. I know the first children's library I established was closed and that none of the seven donkey mobile libraries operate anymore. However, I with a few devoted supporters have established the SEGENAT CHILDREN AND YOUTH LIBRARY in Mekelle, in northern Ethiopia, by far the best library in the country. It is serving at least a thousand children at its peak.

ES. You have also been 'elected to honorary membership on the ALA in recognition of outstanding contributions of lasting importance to libraries and librarianship' (press release of the ALA). How much does this recognition influence your career and your projects?

YG. The recognition is another testament to the importance of promoting reading and literacy and the importance of libraries in a country's development. All the awards and honors I received are more for the idea than the actual work done. I hope this award will in some way help me and a few steadfast supporters to make more efforts to do what we love to do, promote reading. However, we are operating under difficult circumstances since losing the organization.

ES. Which is the message to deliver to librarians nowadays who face difficulties with budget cuts, reconsidering library services and increasing needs for staff competencies? How do you foresee the library picture in the years to come?

YG. It's a common practice even in the US and other developed countries to cut library support in times of economic woes. This is wrong! Cut military spending or even better eliminate it altogether. It's a literate citizen that can safeguard a nation more than the might of its military. A literate world is a SAFE world, safe for democracy and the respect of human dignity. We've to wage war on the TERROR OF ILLITERACY and we'll have no need to wage war on TERRORISM. Countries like Ethiopia don't even have a library or literacy policy and allocate NO MONEY to this effort.

A literate citizen is also a productive citizen. LIBRARIES CREATE COMPETENT AND HUMANE CITIZENS WELL INFORMED TO FIGHT SUPERSTITIONS AND DOGMAS. Literate citizens are FREE citizens. Libraries are needed in millions in every country, town and village supported with new technology for advancement of knowledge. Libraries will live forever. They will evolve and change but will prevail as societies need them.

ES. Last May you visited Thessaloniki as an invited speaker by the National Book Center of Greece. Which are your impressions from the Greek book world and the Greek libraries - if you had the chance to pay visits to any of them - and what would you suggest to the Greek librarians as concerns library services and approaching the clients?

YG. My visit to the THESSALONIKI BOOK FAIR was the most rewarding experience. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank my hosts the NATIONAL BOOK CENTER OF GREECE who have invited me to be present at the book fair at such difficult economic times. The hospitality and genuine friendship I received still warms my heart and soul. I'm quite impressed by the book fair and the general availability of books in Greece, despite the fact that they are mostly in Greek. I didn't get a chance to visit a library but I can sense what they would be like from the books that were available at the book fair. I hope to visit Greece again and visit the libraries. My advice to Greek librarians is BE PROUD THAT YOU ARE LIBRARIANS, THE BEST HUMAN BEINGS. HELPING A CHILD READ AND AN ADULT GET INFORMATION is the best service that there is. Keep opening more libraries.

ES. A last question concerns your name. Both your first and last name make connotation to Greek names. 'Yohannes' is Ioannis in Greek and the second part of your last name '-georgis' forms a similar 2nd part of last names in Greek, e.g.

'Karageorgis', 'Papadogeorgis'. Is there a relation with a Greek root behind it or is it a coincidence?

YG. It's very interesting. You know that Greece and Ethiopia have ancient relationship. We've monuments in the northern part of Ethiopia that have Greek inscriptions. Some of our ancient coins also have Greek writings. We also share a common church, the Orthodox Church. Both Yohannes and Gebre Georgis are Orthodox names. Gebre means servant, which makes it the servant of Georgis, the saint which I suppose is of Greek origin. St Georgis is the patron saint of Ethiopia. We are very much related. I am glad.

ES. In the end, I would like to thank you for this email interview. I hope that the readers of Synergasia will have learned many ideas about providing creative library services. I wish you all the strength and courage to continue your miraculous work. You present us an example of a great librarian who is dedicated to his life-longing goal. I would also like to thank Mrs. C. Velissari, Mrs. M. Bairaktari and my excellent colleague, Mrs. Magda Tsoumi, for making this interview a reality.

YG. Thank you so much, for giving me this opportunity to share my experience with your audience and also for inviting me to your beautiful country. I thank all the people who made my visit a memorable moment. I thank my friend Eugene Trivizas for his support and friendship and for creating the connection. Last but not least I want to thank the person, whose name I didn't get for rushing to me and presenting me with a rare book in Greek about one of our emperor Menelik II. I never got his name or address to personally thank him. It is a great gift of friendship. Thank you.

ES. Thank you, too!