

Empress Taytu had said, 'If you want to grow, work hard and co-operate with others.' The Derg appropriated this in Mengistu's name. It made it into a sign atop the Ministry for Education. We could read it kilometres away.

From 1975, the Ministry shut our history away. School libraries closed; public libraries burned. Students could not afford books, but we had community elders. They were storytellers. Pocketing pencils and brown paper bread bags for note paper, we visited them. We cleaned their houses and gathered firewood, then they taught us.

Elders had used the national library at Emperor Menelik II Palace: Menelik's House of Books. I had been inside it while at Jubilee in Palace School. It was for everybody. The Derg closed it. Our national library would remain a sleeping beauty within 40 hectares of neglected gardens.

Under Emperor Haile Selassie I, it had 15,000 books: 7,800 with basalt or soapstone covers; 5,100 with wood from *warka* and ancient *girar* trees. The rest were bound in leather. Mostly handmade, they were between 500 and 1500 years old. Many were illuminated. The library loaned them at no charge.

Priest librarians came across as ordinary. Each was multilingual, literate in five or six languages, and specialised in a subject. Patrons would leave with a perfect book for one month. Library staff did not record personal information: no name, contact, place of work or address. Priests instead stamped the inside of borrowers' wrists with indelible ink. The shoe shiner or footpath vegetable seller would notice it. 'Ah, you have a book from Menelik's House of Books.'

People commented when rogue patrons kept books for longer than a month. 'The mark is two months old. Why not return the book?' A son said, 'I will return the library book tomorrow.' His mother said, 'Until you do, no food.'

If stamp marks remained, community members could take library patrons to the police station, with, 'By the justice of God.' The utterance could stop the flow of river water. It would make a king step down from the throne to address mundane business. A street sweeper could arrest a prince or official. The police then took the delinquent borrower to the library where staff accepted returns wordlessly and without a fine. The patron had to look away while a priest took a leaf from an opaque jar replenished at midnight. With it they made the wrist mark vanish painlessly.

What about those hyena-like people who cut pages from 1,500-year-old books? Priests handling returns could not detect this straightaway: some had 1,200 pages.

Instead of copying out an appealing article, these people kept it. It could be a recipe for beer or honey wine, the formula for treatment of hepatitis A or a How To on magic spells and witchcraft. A patron might have wanted to learn mineral exploration. They needed a tract on soil types that went with deposits. Then they required instructions on how to mine gold, diamonds, bluestone or uranium and extract and wash the ore.

Weeks later the library patron would be at a community event, perhaps the theatre. There would be an announcement. 'So-and-so has cut a page from _____, a book from the National Library.'

Their wife would run away and file for divorce. Nobody in the community would speak to them. They had to return to the library. The Master of the House of Books was called, heard their case and decided the punishment. It did not include imprisonment for nobody is infallible. No kangaroo court for the rich to bribe and hire expensive lawyers; nor a military court martial with one-size-fits-all punishment.

Masters of empathy, priests put themselves in the patron's position. There would be excuses.

'I was stunned by that illustration.'

'I wanted to know how to get rich.'

'*The Song of David* beguiled me. The book made me a fool. I am a mere human. Its craft and knowledge are in a world of their own. It made me do it.'

The guilty one burst into tears. The master could see through a sob story. Monks would bring tea and continue to listen, reading the offender. Then they posed unexpected questions. Psychologically disarmed, he would confess to having made up the story. No soldiers, guns, no waterboarding or torturing upside down, no starvation or solitary confinement.

The patron awaited the library court's decision. It did not judge people as equal. Some might have a mental disability. Others could suffer economic pressure to prospect for gold.

Penalties depended on the age and rarity of the vandalised book. Judges would sentence ordinary workers to three or four hours of daily community work, lasting between

three and six months. This could be street sweeping, toilet cleaning or tidying the workshops of the disabled, especially the blind.

When wrongdoers completed community service, they were exonerated and returned to society. Nobody mentioned any crime. Futures were not affected by the serious yet one-off error. For their next loan they needed a guarantor. The library permanently barred prominent members of society who vandalised books. Given the chance, what would they do with public funds?

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