

Reaching out to Cambodians

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ABSTRACT

This is a personal narrative describing visits to universities and libraries in Cambodia, and how inclusion and outreach can be shaped through technology and knowledge transfer programme for Cambodians who in general do not have access to good libraries. The paper highlights one important outcome of such programme to ensure the inclusion of Cambodia in an initiative to provide Cambodian information resources electronically.

Keywords: Library outreach programme; Digital library initiatives; Digitization project; National Library of Cambodia; Malaysian-Cambodian collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine all literature from your country was burnt away. Imagine almost all intellectuals, professors, government officials, faculty staff, teachers, librarians or anybody who is related to generating and disseminating knowledge were regarded as pro-American capitalists and were killed. People would even be killed if they wore glasses, for they are assumed to know how to read. Imagine the state of the library in this situation. Or was there one? How can a country like this rejuvenate its libraries, the supposedly house of knowledge and information? How can children read when there were no books, no place where books could be browsed, read, touched for free? This situation is not the result of a natural disaster like the Tsunamis that hit Aceh for example but was created by humans who purposely abhor any kind of learning as reading is associated with betrayal to a country, a pastime of the privileged, a breed despised as the activity pulls an individual away from better pursuits that is considered noble like planting and farming. Imagine a country where there is only one qualified librarian out of over 14 million population, where 73% of the population is literate and where over 64% are between the ages of 15 and 64 years and the median age is 22 years. How can we help out in a situation like this?

Before we were introduced to our neighbour country Cambodia, we were clueless of the predicaments that Cambodians faced between 1974 and 1979. You might say "Hey! That's a long time ago!" But healing takes time and as a nation like Malaysia, which aspire to be developed by 2020 we surely can help in the healing process.

This is a short paper. It does not try to be intellectual. It is not researched based. It is a personal narrative about our thoughts, perceptions and feelings towards a situation. The situation is the state of libraries that we visited in Cambodia between 2011 and 2012.

It all started with a project number 53-02-03-1077, entitled "Social and economic integration: a model for Malaysian-Cambodian collaboration". A large sum of RM 630,000 was mobilized through the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia to the University of Malaya under the "internationalization initiative" and RM 90,000 was channeled by the University to the ICT research cluster, to initiate ICT related collaborative activities. The ICT cluster entitled this project as "Fostering a perpetual sustainable framework for IT human and infrastructure resource development ecosystem". This title is indeed a mouthful and one cannot at one reading comprehend what it actually means. Basically, it means transferring whatever knowledge or ICT related skills and facilities that can be transferred to Cambodians voluntarily. This is Malaysia's aspiration to help the less able ASEAN member countries and a philosophy of service (transfer of technology and knowledge) and education is foremost in this project. The Department of Library and Information Science at the University of Malaya was approached by the ICT Cluster Office to participate in this project. That was how we got involved and as usual as is our nature we thought we would collaborate in research. We did not foresee that research was the last thing in the Cambodian's minds. That was how ignorant we were about Cambodia.

The project was divided into two phases. The first phase involved a fact finding visit, with the objective to visit the national library, selected higher educational institutions and university libraries in Phnom Penh and identify areas where we can lend a hand. The second phase involved visiting universities in the Siem Reap region. We know our strength, which are experiences in developing digital libraries and institutional repositories and felt that we could help set up digital libraries and repositories to those requesting this and of course establish research collaborations.

THE VISIT

Two visits were carried out firstly to Phnom Penh between 26 October and 2 November 2011 and secondly to Siem Reap between 20 and 23 June 2012. The objectives of the visit were twofold. Firstly to visit selected institutional and university libraries and secondly, to identify the library's needs and strategize on the form of assistance to give.

The National Library of Cambodia, Phnom Penh

We nearly missed the National library as the picture of the library (Figure 1) on their website way outshine what we saw. The building looks like an old colonial house, which could easily be passed as a house of some previously wealthy Cambodian. The building badly needed a fresh coat of paint. The approach road to the building was not tarred, and of laterite earth. As it has rained the previous day the driveway was muddy. There were fruit trees bordering the building. It could easily have been a courtyard of someone's house.

As it was about 2 p.m. and we waited for the chief librarian to allow us in as the building was locked. Maybe, we thought, they still practised the European afternoon siesta and would take longer lunch breaks. We waited for half an hour when, a woman simply dressed in a sarong and short blouse greeted us. She apologised, unlocked the door and allowed us in. The first impression we have was the emptiness of the room. It was large and there were huge old fashion tables and chairs of good wood for users. There were no

users or readers. There were shelves that lined the walls, sparsely lined with books (Figure 2).



Figure 1: The National Library of Cambodia



Figure 2: The Good Old Card Catalogue at the National Library of Cambodia

There were black and white photographs lining the walls. Mrs Khlot Vibolla, the chief librarian briefed us about the library and indicated that there was no public library in Phnom Penh and therefore, the National Library provide lending services. There was no legal depository legislation as yet and therefore, it was difficult to track everything that is being or has been published in Cambodia. Cambodia has lost a major part of its literature as millions of books were lost to the ways of the Khmer Rouge regime between 1974 and 1979. Some of these books have been salvaged, microfilmed and kept in universities abroad. The National Library is slowly rebuilding their Cambodiana collections with the help of donations from NGOs, the United Nations, the French government and the United States. Vibolla mentioned about her needs to digitize microfilm copies of over 500 Cambodian novels, which she had obtained from the Echoll Library, University of Cornell, United States.

What we noticed was that the Director's Office is so small and cluttered so unlike chief librarians' offices in Malaysia! During our conversation one European walked in and Mrs Vibolla introduced him as Mr Tony Morine, a volunteer with an NGO from New Zealand. He was wearing a red T-shirt and knee length shorts and slippers. Mr Morine tried to show us a programme that he has developed for the National Library but the line or the Internet connection was down so we could not see his contribution to the set up.

We promised two things to Mrs Vibolla, that (a) we could fly in one of her staff to the University of Malaya and use our digital Canon microfilm scanner that the Department had

bought from a research grant obtained from the Ministry of Science and Technology, Malaysia. This scanner has been placed at the University of Malaya library as they were the partner in the project to develop a digital library of digitized Malay manuscripts and some of these manuscripts were on microfilms, and (b) if required we could assist in developing a digital library for the digitized collections. We took photographs with Vibolla and Morine (Figure 3) and left the library feeling happy that we could lend a hand.



Figure 3: The Authors with Mrs Vibolla in the Middle and Mr Morine on Far Left

Panha Chiet University Library, Phom Penh

This is a new University in Phnom Penh established in 2009. The Director, Dr Lincoln Dews is a very young Cambodian (we guessed he is in his early thirties), very tall, handsome and spoke with a very British accent. The library we visited was the size of maybe three classrooms in a Malaysian school. There were few books on the shelves but all of the books looked new (Figure 4). We talked to the Senior Vice President, Dr Dequito, a Filipino, who briefed us about the library, and she indicated that, the university does not have a qualified librarian and as result they found problems in cataloguing books, which were mainly in English. What surprised us was that even though Cambodia has been under French rule, their determination to change and progress is relentless. English are taught in schools and English is the medium of instructions at the university. There were computers with Internet access in the library and the willingness to assimilate anything new is amazing. Dr Dequito indicated that they would welcome if we could provide their staff with a short course on cataloguing and the need for a library automated system. We left the University with a promise of offering the service if we have the finance and a volunteer to provide for a short cataloguing course.

Centre of Information Systems Training Centre, Phnom Penth

This is an ICT training Centre established by an NGO from France. The Coordinator who showed us around was Mr Stephane Pointu a Frenchman. This centre trains disadvantaged school leavers on ICT related courses to service the growing blue collar ICT job market in

the country. In other words ICT courses are in demand as there are jobs in this field waiting for school leavers.

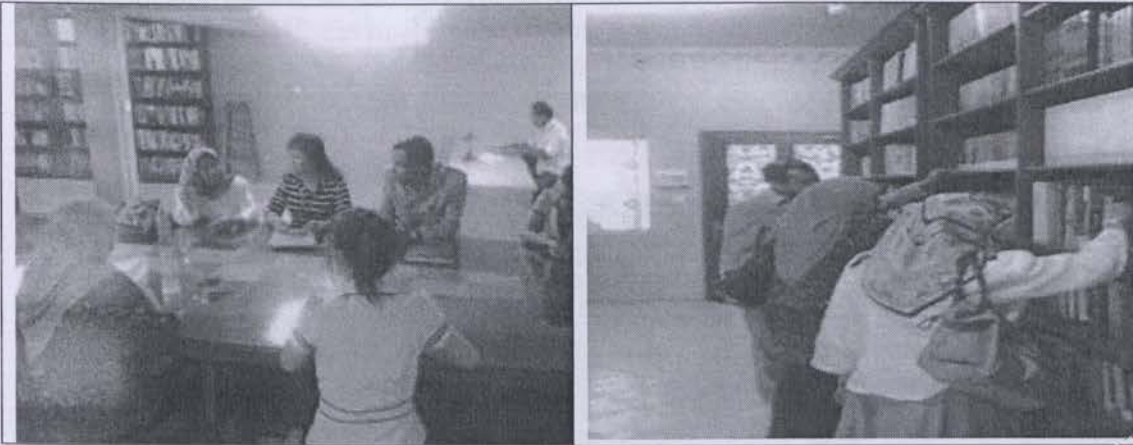


Figure 4: Left: Dr Dequito in Black and White Stripped Blouse and Both Abrizah and Zainab Thinking Hard How to Help this Very New University.
Right: Inspecting Shelves of Uncatalogued Books.

The Library in this training centre is VERY small, similar to a single classroom in Malaysia (Figure 5). There were low tables and students set on the floor. Everybody took off their shoes when they enter the library. The students were extremely polite and well behaved. Everybody was so quiet, bending intensely over their books. Mr Pointu said that most of the students were very grateful to be given the opportunity to study there as it was a sure way out of helping their families out of poverty. Every student we met bow courteously putting their palms together (like a prayer) to show reverence when they passed us. We wish Malaysian students behave like this! And their toilet is absolutely clean too!



Figure 5: The One-Room Library at the Training Centre

Pannasastra University of Cambodia, Phnom Penh and Siem Reap

This is a private university in Phnom Penh and boost to be one of the best private university in Cambodia. The library is certainly impressive and fully equipped with computers and Internet facilities (Figure 6). Ms Mao Kolap the chief librarian is said to be the only qualified librarian in the country. She holds an MLIS degree from United States.

She talked animatedly about her studies in the United States and her library. The library, with the help of the University Computer Centre, has developed an in-house library system and was experimenting with creating a digital library of student theses and research reports. We agreed to perhaps collaborate in undertaking a joint research on “readiness to contribute to institutional repository among lecturers”. Copies of the questionnaire that Abrizah had prepared were left with the chief librarian for distribution to academic staff.



Figure 6: Left: Discussion with Mao Kolap. Right: The Computers with Internet Access and the Library Bustling with Activity at Pannasastra.

We also visited the University’s branch at Siem Reap, which was smaller but just as bustling (Figure 7).

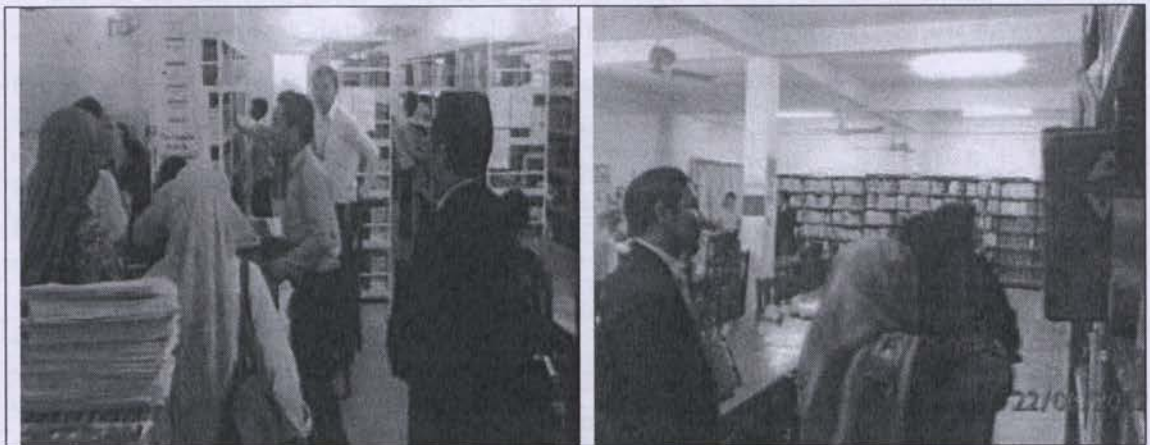


Figure 7: Pannasastra’s Library at Siem Reap Campus

University of South East Asia (USEA), Siem Reap

This is a private University established in 2007. As usual we noticed that as characteristics of all new universities in Cambodia, the enthusiasm is high. To cope with the growth the university courses are offered in two sessions, morning and afternoons. A new building block is in the process of being built right opposite the current building. We met with the President and presented a one day seminar for the students and staff. USEA has already established an MOU with our university and Ling expressed the interest and support on behalf of the ICT Cluster for collaboration. Zainab talked about the MLIS programme and

that we welcome students from all disciplines and informed them about channels from which they could solicit for grants. Abrizah touched on the possibility of assisting in the development of an institutional repository to house the final year students' reports and dissertations. The library is about three classroom size. All shelves lined the walls with user seating areas in the centre. The books are not organized by international standard format and there were shelves of books donated by the World Bank and Asia's Foundation.

THE OUTCOME

Since we had only a year to carry out activities we decided on realizing the most beneficial assistance first and therefore opt to assist the needs of Mrs Vibolla of the Cambodian National Library (NLC) first. This is due to the lack of financial budget given to the National Library, which had to undertake the daunting task of collecting and preserving Cambodian collections. Scanning machines which support digitization is beyond the means of the National Library. Correspondence was made to Vibolla from January to March 2012 where we expressed the intent to partner with NLC in an initiative to provide Cambodian information resources electronically and funded by the University of Malaya. As a result we opted to fly in one staff from the National Library, who would be trained to use the scanning machines as well as digitize resources from microfilms. Under this "reaching out" programme, it was agreed that:

1. University of Malaya (UM) and the University of Malaya Library (UML) will provide the necessary infrastructure and training to digitize selected collection of Cambodian resources. NLC will identify the resources (print, microfiche, microfilms) to be digitized and plan for the resources to be delivered to UML.
2. This technical correspondent from NLC should be able to visit the University of Malaya for training purposes (digitization of resources) for a maximum of 2 months. The correspondent will be given a stipend of USD1000 per month to cover the cost of flight, accommodation at the University of Malaya, living allowance and local transportation

Mr Sok Sophal, the Deputy Director, arrived in Kuala Lumpur on 25 March 2012 and was placed at the Client Services Division University of Malaya Library (UML) for two months, from 26 March 2012 to 25 May 2012. Mr Sophal brought with microfilm rolls of 500 titles of Cambodian fiction. The microfilms were donated by the Echoll's Library, Cornell University. He was given the training digitize the microfilms – a total of 200 rolls of microfilm were scanned into digital images from 16mm or 35mm rolls or cartridges. The microfilm was digitised into high quality images very cost-effectively using the Digital canon microfilm scanner (Figure 8) (costs RM50,000) purchased under Zainab's MyManuskrip IRPA project. As a result of this work, the digitized copies of Cambodian fictions 12GB in size are stored in optical discs and in FCSIT SAN storage.

Mr Sophal worked very hard till late in the evenings each day and weekends too in order to complete digitizing all titles on the microfilm rolls (Figure 9). At the end, over 500 titles of Cambodian fiction were digitized (Figure 10, Figure 11). He expressed his intent to learn how to develop a digital library using an open source software. Beginning 3 May 2012, after work at UML, he would walked to the faculty where Ling and Dr Noorhidawati Abdullah (a faculty member) trained him to: (a) Install a digital library using DSpace software; (b) Create collections in the digital library software; and (c) Upload, as well as provide metadata for the digital files in the digital library.

This is the tenacity that is typical of Cambodians that we have met. They are humble and extremely grateful of any assistance given. This is a trait that maybe modern generation of Malaysians have forgotten to be that is not taking for granted of what we have and seizing every opportunities given to the fullest.

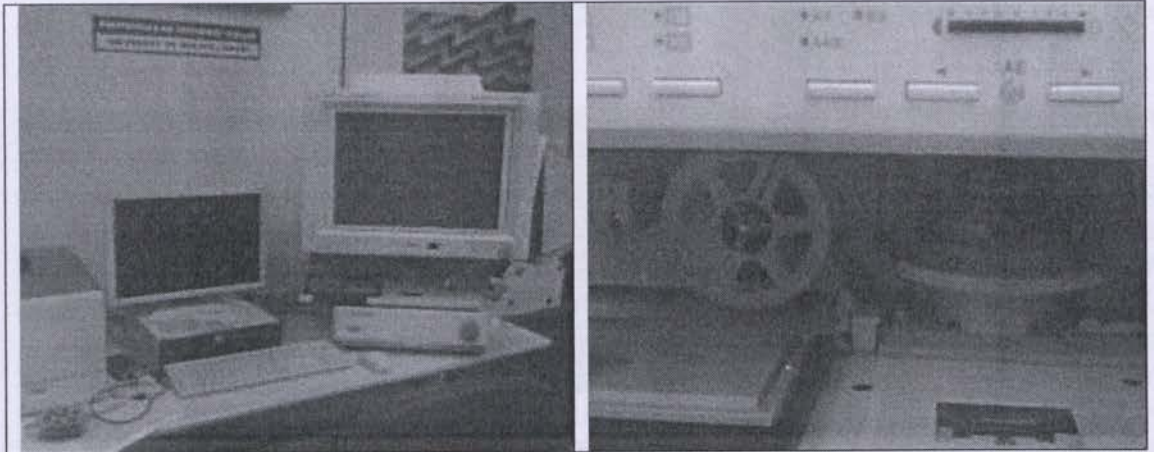


Figure 8: The Equipment Used to Digitized the Microfilms



Figure 9: Mr Sophal Hard at Work Digitizing the Cambodian Fictions

ល.រ	នាមប្រតិបត្តិ	ឈ្មោះសៀវភៅ	លេខសៀវភៅ	ចំណងជើងកម្រិត	អ្នកបោះពុម្ព	ឆ្នាំចេញផ្សាយ	ទំព័រ	តម្លៃ
០១	លា	ឆ្នាំ៧៦	០១	ស្រុក	ប្រកាស	១៩៧៦	១០០	១០០០
០២	-	-	០២	ស្រុក	ប្រកាស	១៩៧៦	១០០	១០០០
០៣	-	-	០៣	ស្រុក	ប្រកាស	១៩៧៦	១០០	១០០០
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០៥	-	-	០៥	ស្រុក	ប្រកាស	១៩៧៦	១០០	១០០០
០៦	-	-	០៦	ស្រុក	ប្រកាស	១៩៧៦	១០០	១០០០
០៧	-	-	០៧	ស្រុក	ប្រកាស	១៩៧៦	១០០	១០០០
០៨	-	-	០៨	ស្រុក	ប្រកាស	១៩៧៦	១០០	១០០០
០៩	-	-	០៩	ស្រុក	ប្រកាស	១៩៧៦	១០០	១០០០
១០	លា	ឆ្នាំ៧៧	០១	ស្រុក	ប្រកាស	១៩៧៧	១០០	១០០០
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១៨	-	-	០៩	ស្រុក	ប្រកាស	១៩៧៧	១០០	១០០០

Figure 10: The List of Cambodian Titles from the Ecolls Library

Lam Pun Yan
Phsaen
dhup...
Bhnam Ben
1973

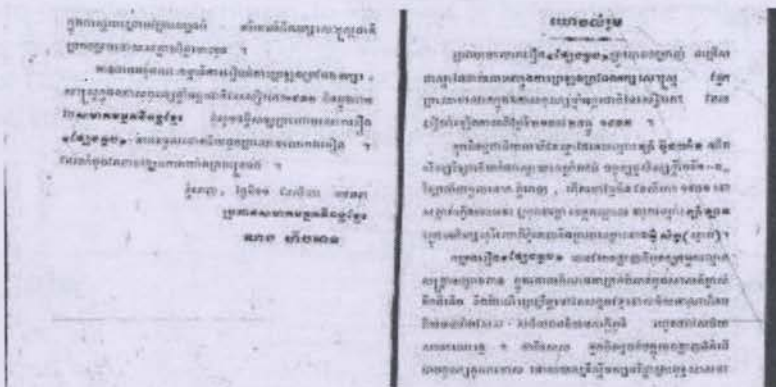


Figure 11: An Example of a Digitized Copy of Cambodian Fiction - LamPun Yan Phsean Shup/ Bhnam Ben, 1973

Throughout this attachment, Mr Sok Sophal has got the opportunity to access the training facilities and resources and acquired new knowledge and technical experience regarding preservation of library resources, as well as working in a new academic library environment. Both Sok Sophal and his director, Khlott Vibolla, in their e-mails, are appreciative of this partnership project to facilitate access to Cambodian resources online (Figure 12 and Figure 13).

In future we would offer short courses on cataloguing to the library assistants. We would also offer places for bright Cambodians who wish to undertake the Master in Library and Information Science programme at the Faculty under several financial assistance options available or even attach themselves to UM library for self-improvement programmes. This would hopefully help increase the pool of qualified librarians needed in the country and increase the prestige of the profession.

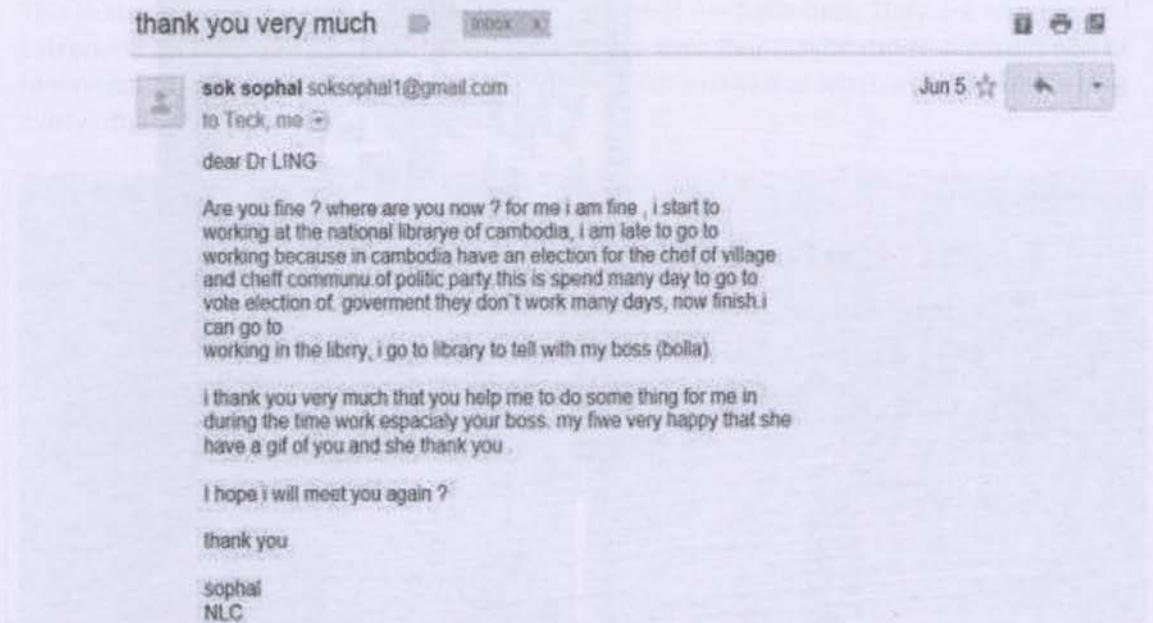


Figure 12: Mr Sok Sopal's e-mail to Ling

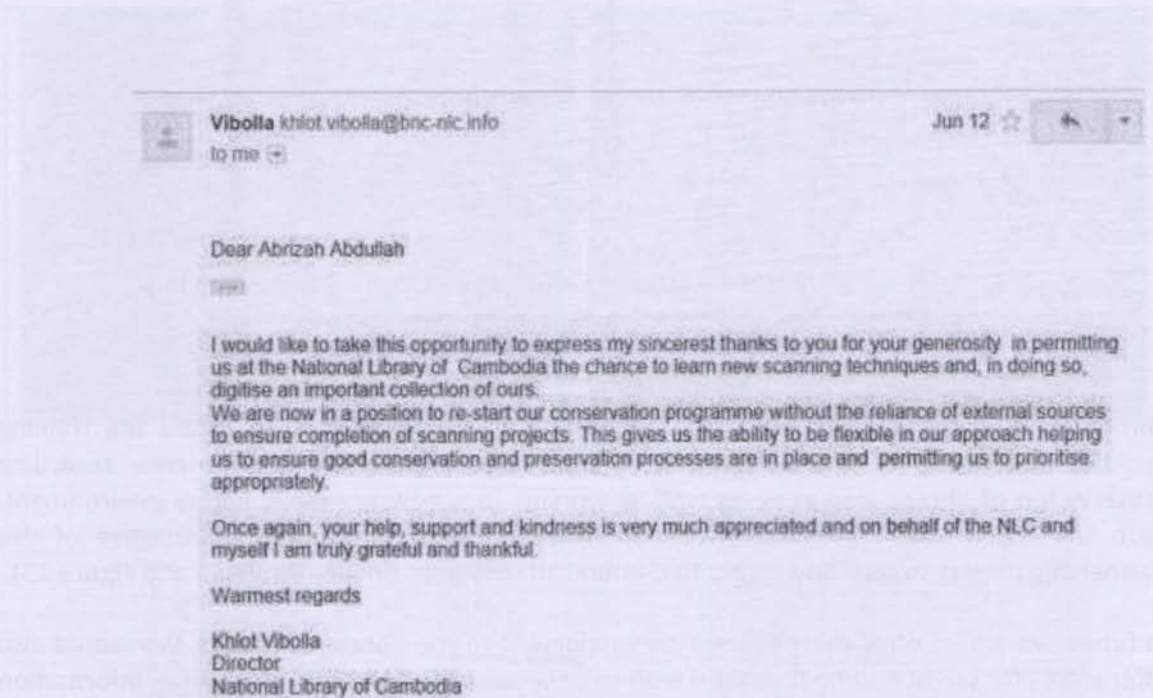


Figure 13: The National Library Director's e-mail to Abrizah

AFTER THOUGHTS

Cambodia is our neighbour and in need of assistance. What moved our hearts was the tenacity with which Cambodians show in wanting to improve themselves. With just over 14 million people, the country is fairly under populated, youthful and education is regarded as important. Apart from heavily endowed private universities, the state of libraries in the government universities are way behind other ASEAN countries. Books are mainly donated

by NGOs. At Pannansastra University in Siem Reap we saw shelves of books labelled "United Nation" and "World Bank". Visiting the Killing Fields of Cheung Erk and S21-interrogation centre (now Toul Sleng Genocide Museum) in Phnom Pen humbled us, horrified that such tragedy happened so close to our door steps and grateful that we in Malaysia are "safe". It may be difficult for those who have not visited Cambodia to phantom the reality of how lucky we felt. As if not enough both, Abrizah and Zainab devoured books on Cambodian history and personal narratives of war survivors. Having this experience has opened our eyes and minds. We are grateful to the Ministry of Higher Education for the grant that allow us to open our minds and hearts to the Cambodian people.

Now, surely the library community in Malaysia can also help in various ways through inclusion and outreach efforts to match the present needs of Cambodian libraries. At the more basic level, we can collaboratively set up mini rural libraries, donate books or even engage voluntarily in teaching children to read through basic readers. As a group we can volunteer to provide short courses to librarians or help catalogue collections and organize collections in schools and universities. We can help with creating and even hosting digital libraries for Cambodia. The sky is the limit and no task is insurmountable when our hearts are committed.