



Experiencing Teranga: A Library Fellowship in Dakar, Senegal, West Africa

OLIVIA HASAN

ESSAY/COMMENTARY

 **VIRGINIA TECH.**
PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT

Traveling for work opportunities in librarianship can be rare, even more so for public librarians. It is even rarer to travel internationally with all expenses paid for a summer in West Africa. This piece is to encourage readers to seek out opportunities, apply for positions like the library fellowship, and live out lifelong goals.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Olivia Hasan

Hampton Public Library, US
olivia.hasan@hampton.gov

KEYWORDS:

international; fellowship;
librarians; librarianship

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Hasan, Olivia. "Experiencing Teranga: A Library Fellowship in Dakar, Senegal, West Africa." *Virginia Libraries* 66, no. 1 (2022): 1, pp. 1–9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/valib.v66i1.635>

After finishing my undergraduate degree in English, I was a marketing intern for an international machinery corporation subsidiary. I was offered the position of marketing coordinator the following year. I wrote articles, created marketing materials, proofread print items, and scheduled social media posts. I managed our literature library, packaged internal orders, met with engineers, and traveled to various cities, including Atlanta, Phoenix, Las Vegas, and Seattle. I traveled around the U.S. with my family growing up, but these professional opportunities solidified a life including travel. For personal travel, my husband and I obtained our passports shortly after college, and we have visited Hawaii, The Bahamas, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Spain, Morocco, Portugal, and Jamaica. These trips inspired me to seek out ways I could fuse together professional and personal travel later in life.

For a while, I was the youngest person in the company, and I did all of this while pursuing my master's in library and information science. I chose librarianship because I wanted to be better connected to my community, further diversify collections, and inspire the next set of readers, thinkers, and imaginative minds.

After I completed my master's degree, I applied to a children's librarian position. A couple of months later, I entered my new office and new career. It was a bittersweet moment to leave my marketing career with wonderful coworkers, engaging projects, and travel opportunities, but I hoped those elements would follow me into librarianship. I expected two out of three—wonderful coworkers and engaging projects—but I was unsure if any travel opportunities would arise. Much to my surprise, I would travel in a big, big way for librarianship.

INTERNATIONAL LIBRARY FELLOWSHIP

In early February 2021, I opened an email from a Virginia Library Association Librarians of Color Forum member and friend about an international library fellowship opportunity in Dakar, Senegal, that would last six to eight weeks. It mentioned a fully funded stipend to cover food, housing, meals, and daily living expenses. I did a double take at the application due date, and I quickly realized it was due in five days. This was my chance to combine professional and personal travel, and it was to a country that was on my dream list. I took a deep breath, received a lot of encouragement from my husband, friends, and colleagues, and I applied. I completed the application, submitted my resume, drafted a personal statement, provided my undergraduate and graduate transcripts, and secured three letters of recommendation.

While the application process had many components, it was a smooth process. Personally, I found the anticipation

to be the hardest part. If I were chosen, I had a lot to prepare for. Professionally, I am a full-time librarian, lead a children's department, and have forum, council, and conference responsibilities for the Virginia Library Association. Personally, I am married, and we own a home.

Two months later in April, I received an email from the West African Research Association (WARA) stating I was the 2021 Library Fellow. I was shocked and stunned, to say the least.

WARA is an organization dedicated to the awareness and research of West Africa and the diaspora. Through its fellowships, conferences, and publications, researchers and professionals have the opportunity to exchange research and ideas. The West African Research Center (WARC) in Dakar, Senegal, is WARA's international headquarters, and it provides a multi-use facility, wireless internet access, and an on-site café. International users and collegiate locals alike frequent the center.

WARA provides fellowship opportunities for graduate and doctorate students as well as library scholars. The Library Fellowship is an opportunity for graduate students and working professionals to experience West Africa, visit WARC, and assist the library staff in their goals and endeavors—with travel expenses covered and a stipend provided.

I applied to the program to gain a deeper understanding of librarianship, to experience an academic library setting, to delve into a new culture, and to have the opportunity to visit a dream country. You, too, may wonder if a national or international experience may work well for your professional development. I would recommend researching the hosting association or conference, receiving encouragement and advice from trusted colleagues, looking into the area or country, and seeking out individuals who may have completed the program in previous years.

PREPARATION

I had three months to prepare for my international fellowship. I decided to divide up the preparation work, so I could fit everything into the approaching timeframe. I called it the four P's:

1. Paperwork
2. Pre-order
3. Prescriptions
4. Provisions

Paperwork: I signed my acceptance form, confirmed my passport information, turned in vaccination records, forwarded over travel insurance, and notified my human

resources team, just to name a few. I created a checklist for the fellowship, my job, and home as my to-do list grew exponentially in each area.

Pre-order: I needed to pre-order a large amount of library materials. As a Children's Librarian with nine positions in my department, I needed to pre-order a lot of library items to ensure the team would be well taken care of, and I would not miss out on any important publication releases while I was away. I carved out time each Friday to peruse journals and collection development sites to order our materials between the summer and fall months.

Prescriptions: I extended my prescriptions to last the two months abroad and obtained a new one, an antimalarial. I called my doctor's office, and they were able to send everything I needed over to the pharmacy via a phone call. I took this medication as a precautionary measure before, during, and after the trip as mosquitos are quite prevalent in this region.

Provisions: I ordered a new set of hard-case luggage, purchased linen clothing, stocked up on beauty and hygiene items, and created a packing area in my home. I added on an international phone plan, saved the travel insurance plan into my photos for quick access, and further researched the city I would call home for the summer. I exchanged U.S. dollars for West African CFA Francs ahead of time, as Senegal is a cash-dominant country. While there is access to many items in stores and malls, the brands or product types vary greatly country-to-country, so I packed my life into two suitcases and a travel backpack.

DAKAR, SENEGAL, WEST AFRICA

Dakar is the capital city of Senegal (Figure 1). It is a lively city with a population of over one million. It is also the most western point of Senegal and for the African continent.



Figure 1 The African Renaissance Monument is a 160+ ft tall bronze statue located on top of one of the twin hills known as Collines des Mamelles, in Dakar, Senegal.

French is the national language, but Wolof is the primary and preferred language. It is a city with many dichotomies, like most cities. It is bustling with transportation, but tranquil as people pause to pray on the sidewalks or inside businesses. There is a dynamic beach and surfing community at the top of the city, followed by a sizable banking and business district at the bottom. Expensive homes, cars, and boutiques line the streets, but also some small communities live in close quarters (Figure 2). Aikena Cakes is a perfect example of the French and Senegalese fusion. Aikena Cakes is a Senegalese-French pastry shop and café with a striking teal exterior and soft pink interior with chandeliers across the ceiling. The pastries and service were stellar. There are goats on sidewalks, on rooftop terraces, and in pickup trucks that pass by. There are horse-drawn carts with fruits and wares. The sidewalks may be cracked and broken from heavy foot traffic and cars parking on top, with dusty sand brushing across the surface.

It is also home to WARC, located in the Fann area of the city. Nearby, there are embassies, businesses, hospitals, federal buildings, hotels, and the largest university in the area—Cheikh Anta Diop University. This university makes up a large percentage of library users at WARC.

FELLOWSHIP

The fellowship was focused in the library of WARC (Figure 3). It is a three-part building with an entryway and office area, an African Studies room, and an American Studies room. For the day-to-day tasks, I often sat in the office area to meet the library users, created new library user profiles, checked out materials, and worked on the catalog. I also shelved books and helped users find materials on the shelves.



Figure 2 Aikena Cakes is a Senegalese-French pastry shop and café with a striking teal exterior and soft pink interior with chandeliers across the ceiling. The pastries and service were stellar.



Figure 3 The West African Research Center Library, where I spent the majority of my time. It is a quiet, but lively space with students and researchers.

My main WARC Library project for 2021 focused on gaining a deeper understanding of their users. I observed the library in its daily operations. Then, I surveyed master's and PhD students on their experiences with the library. I asked them what they were studying, which degree type they were pursuing, how often they visited the library, how long they had been coming to the library, and what items were needed for their continued success. I created an online survey to best collect their answers and later analyze the trends. It helped me understand their needs and ultimately add to the report I drafted. I also added newly acquired items into their digital database and learned about their visions for the space. After weeks of

watching, learning, and discussing, I put together an eighteen-page report of ideas and recommendations for the library to continue to advance. I recommended organizational tools for the front office, integrated library system software finds, and ways to acquire updated titles. The librarian and the WARC director were receptive to the ideas and were enticed to see what additions could be made.

I was invited to lunch each day at the on-site café. I took Wolof language lessons twice a week. I even toured the city every weekend with three new friends—two Senegalese women from WARC and an anthropology PhD student. We met a world-class photographer and her husband, the



Figure 4 Les Almadies is home to some of the most stunning beaches and surf communities. It is the most western point of Senegal and all of Africa.

champion surfer of Senegal (Figure 4). We visited Gorée Island, the home of the ‘House of Slaves’ and the ‘Door of No Return’ (Figure 5). Over 20 million enslaved Black people passed through this area. It was deeply emotional, but a necessary visit to understand the history and depth. It is now reclaimed by the Senegalese as an area to relax, go to the beaches, and reflect. We visited the local markets, the beaches, the African Renaissance Monument, and the Black Civilizations Museum (Figure 6). I visited boutiques and fabric stores every chance I had. I obtained a variety of fabrics, and I had the opportunity to visit my host family’s tailor for custom garments. We discussed life in Dakar, the various ethnic groups in the country, the languages spoken, the foods served, the triumphs of their people, and the developments still to come.

I lived with a host family about one and a half miles away from WARC. Their family consisted of a madame of the home, two adult daughters (one of which had

two elementary school-aged children), and a live-in housekeeper. I had my own bedroom, bathroom, and balcony along with all of my meals provided. While some of the meals in the home are plated, the majority of them are around a large, shared serving bowl. You eat with your right hand, and you keep to a triangular area in front of you. Eating in this style is common among families and friends, as it shows closeness, love, and trust. We often ate chicken, beef, goat, lamb, or fish with rice, potatoes, soup, or noodles. They showed me around the neighborhood, helped me find businesses in town, and wished me well each morning before walking to the research center. *Teranga*, which is Wolof for hospitality, is a cardinal concept within the country and culture. You will hear and see this word often, but most importantly *experience* it time and time again. I walked to the center and back five days a week, partly because of language issues, but partly to experience the city in its totality.



Figure 5 Gorée is a small island south of Dakar. The area had a big impact on the Transatlantic slave trade and the mistreatment of millions of Black people. Fortunately, it has been reclaimed by the Senegalese as a place of retreat.

As amazing as this experience was, it was one of the most challenging experiences of my life. I had reactions to the prescribed antimalarial medication, it was incredibly hot each day, and I unfortunately got food poisoning on day forty-six out of forty-nine. I had many linguistic challenges by not speaking French or Wolof well, but it was truly worth every second. It was one of the most impactful experiences of my professional and personal life.

TAKEAWAYS

While I had done some international travel prior to visiting Senegal, the country is unlike any other. Within one moderate car ride, you can experience a sandy beach, rocky coastline, small neighborhood areas, boutiques, and high-rise financial buildings. Their customs, culture,

cuisine, and many other components are unique and much appreciated. The trip is a library fellowship opportunity, but I found the friendships I made to be the most meaningful. They made sure I was comfortable and well-informed.

I think about this trip often, in fact, daily, since returning in September 2021. I remember the cultural sites, markets, museums, the sound of a bus, the early morning prayer calls from the mosques, and the smiles of so many people I met.

I highly encourage anyone interested in traveling around the U.S. or internationally to seek out opportunities. There are library fellowships, conferences, and trip packages available. There are opportunities to travel to states such as Florida, New Mexico, or Washington. On an international scale, not only are there librarianship opportunities in Senegal, but also South Africa, England, and Hungary (to name a few). *Nanda Journeys* offers theme-based trips in many countries, one of which is a library trip and tour in



Figure 6 A fabric boutique in the northern part of Dakar, Senegal. It is common practice to select fabrics from Senegal and West African countries to create custom clothing.

South Africa. The University of Debrecen in Hungary hosts BOBCATSSS, an international symposium each year in the late spring for librarians and information professionals. The latter is offered in-person and virtually.

On a professional level, I learned to continue to network and think often of our library users. I develop programs and events that meet the needs of my community, but also help to set trends. I seek out more language books and materials, connect quickly with patrons, and share travel stories often. I continue to email and message my contacts and friends in Senegal. On a personal level, I learned to advocate for myself, communicate more effectively, and to always be ready for an adventure. Our home now has woven baskets and bowls, wood carvings, and gorgeous fabrics. These items and hundreds of photographs are a

beautiful reminder of the opportunity that helped shaped my librarianship and me.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The West African Research Association provided a stipend to cover travel, housing, and daily expenses for the during of my library fellowship in Dakar, Senegal.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Olivia Hasan

Hampton Public Library, US; Virginia Library Association Librarians of Color Forum, US

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Hasan, Olivia. "Experiencing Teranga: A Library Fellowship in Dakar, Senegal, West Africa." *Virginia Libraries* 66, no. 1 (2022): 1, pp. 1–9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/valib.v66i1.635>

Submitted: 23 March 2022

Accepted: 26 April 2022

Published: 12 July 2022

COPYRIGHT:

© 2022 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Virginia Libraries is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by VT Publishing.