

Library philosophy vs. Apartheid legislation: Cape Town City Libraries: 1952-1972

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Abstract:

This presentation investigates the history and development of the Cape Town City Libraries (CTCL) from 1952-1972 and examines the effect of apartheid legislation on establishing a public library system. Legislation introduced by the National Party enforced segregation and applied censorship which brought CTCL into conflict with library philosophy. This legislation determined who the CTCL could serve, where they could serve them and what they could serve.

Keywords: Library history; Cape Town; Apartheid; Censorship; Book burning

Introduction

The National Party was voted into government in 1948 and immediately introduced legislation which enforced segregation including:

- The Population Register Act which classified people as white, coloured, black
- The Group areas Act which designated areas for specific racial groups
- The Reservation of Separate Amenities Act which designated which group could use a facility

Legislation was introduced to control access to books and information:

- General Law Amendment Act which banned people and their writings
- Publications and Entertainments Act which allowed books, films etc. to be banned.

The Provincial Library Ordinances of 1949 and 1955 included a separate facilities clause.

The Bantu Education Amendment Act 1956, placed libraries for blacks with the education department rather than the provincial and municipal authorities as was the case for whites and coloureds.

According to T.E. Donges, Minister of the Interior, 1948-1958, the aim of the apartheid laws was to remove points of contact between people of different groups.

In 1949 the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto was published and spoke of equal use for all races and accessibility.

CTCL was confronted by these two ideologies. The question is how did a public library service deal with the contradictions of a public library philosophy of free access and equality and the apartheid system of separate facilities and censorship?

Establishment of Cape Town City Libraries (CTCL)

Before the establishment of CTCL library facilities in Cape Town included subscription libraries which were virtually whites only because of the fee. The Cape Libraries Extension Association (CLEA) offered a free service which virtually coloured.

In April 1944 a library commission was established and recommended the establishment of a free municipal library service for the Cape municipal area (City of Cape Town 1945). In 1945, the Cape Town City Council accepted the recommendations of the commission on condition that provincial government paid half the costs. In 1949, the Provincial Library Ordinance was proclaimed which allowed urban library areas to be declared. ULA would receive a subsidy of at least 50% on expenditure from province but significantly the ordinance also included a clause that separate facilities would have to be provided for whites and non-whites (Varley 1950).

According to Varley (1950), the Cape Town City Council had two options:

- To have Cape Town declared an urban library area on the assumption that its library service would be implemented on its own understanding of separate facilities or,
- To run a library service without the provincial subsidy.

Although there was some opposition to accepting the subsidy, the council adopted the Ordinance despite the fact that, according to them, the segregation clause was contrary to its policy in such matters (City of Cape Town 1953). In 1951 Cape Town was declared an Urban Library Area and the scheme recommended by the library commission in 1944 was approved for subsidy (Varley 1951).

The CTCL started operating in April 1952 and incorporated CLEA

The political context and its impact on the development of CTCL

The legislation determined who the CTCL could serve and where they could serve them. When the library service started in 1952, there were libraries in areas that were racially segregated and libraries in areas with a mixed population. CTCL did not immediately enforce segregation where libraries were mixed. Hood, the city librarian, spoke of a policy of gradualism. However there was segregation from the beginning. Library regulations mentioned a separate “non-European” service and there were mobile libraries for blacks in mainly white areas, even though there was a library (Jansen 2013). Staff of different racial groups were treated differently, for example, coloureds worked as aides in morning and then went to own libraries.

From 1959, CTCL faced pressure from the provincial administration to apply the separate facilities clause even though there was apartheid in most libraries because of the Group Areas Act. The council was informed by the provincial secretary that separate facilities had to be applied and the council had to inform them how it would be enforced. The council was given three years, until 8 June 1962, to implement the changes (City of Cape Town 1959). Council commissioned a survey and report in 1959 which showed that libraries were in general segregated and also that segregation was applied at head office:

- Survey showed that Central, Wynberg and Woodstock libraries' membership was the most mixed
- Report indicated that at head office 'professionally qualified non-whites don't do professional work as this would involve working with white staff/white professional staff at predominantly white libraries and vice versa' (City of Cape Town 1961).

Even though there was apartheid in most libraries because of the group areas act the province wanted the council to apply it 100%. The provincial secretary, W.J.B. Slater, acknowledged that some libraries were mostly coloured or white but seemed affronted that 'no distinction is made between the races' (Cape Argus 1961). The provincial administration used the 1959 library survey to determine the race of a library and in January 1961 informed city libraries to segregate the libraries accordingly. Full segregation of libraries had not been implemented by the deadline of 8 June 1962 and in July 1962 the Administrator insisted on apartheid in libraries. The 1963 provincial subsidy was only approved on condition that the library service report how apartheid was to be implemented

In response to the pressure Cape Town City Libraries noted what they would do to implement apartheid:

- all new libraries were to be segregated from 1965
- Segregated libraries were planned for Wynberg and Woodstock and,
- Separate facilities were planned for the Central Library (City of Cape Town 1965a).

The effect of the segregation legislation in libraries is demonstrated by examining Wynberg, Central, Woodstock and Langa libraries.

Wynberg Library

Wynberg Library was established in 1896 as a subscription library and joined CTCL in 1954. According to the 1959 survey library membership was made up of all racial groups as follows:

- 77 ½ % white
- 22 % Coloured
- ½ % Black

Photos from the time show the library being by all racial groups.

To enforce the separate facilities clause in Wynberg the council opened another library in September 1967. The original library was for whites only and coloured and black members had to use the new Castletown library.

A notice put up at the Wynberg Library stated

The City Council has been obliged to provide separate library facilities for whites and non-whites, in order to comply with the requirements of Cape Provincial Library Ordinance No. 4 of 1955. In Wynberg a new library for non-white members has been built on the corner of Sussex and Bexhill Roads. It will be known as the Castletown branch. As this library is now open, we greatly regret that we must request our non-white members to transfer their membership to it (Cape Argus 1967).

There was a public response with letters to newspapers against the segregation. A newspaper article noted that this was the first time in municipal libraries in Cape Town that apartheid was applied and that no ceremony was held for the opening because of the way it was provided (Cape Argus 1967).

Central Library

Central Lending opened in the South African Public Library (SAPL) building in 1955 as a temporary measure until a site could be found in the city centre. In 1962 the council leased new premises for the central library. The discussions before the taking on the lease took into account that the provincial administration would expect separate facilities to be applied. Councillor Gool said that “separate facilities were an insult not only to the Cape Coloured people but to all non-white races” (Cape Times 1962). Gool had been fighting against separate library facilities since the 1940s. In 1941 she opposed a council grant to establish a non-European library service (Cape Times 1941). The city librarian, Vermeulen, submitted a report on how separate facilities would be applied. From the report it seemed that Vermeulen was not in favour of implementing separate facilities. Vermeulen noted:

The plan has been devised as a means of carrying out the instructions of the provincial administrator while attempting to solve the practical problems raised thereby. Detailed planning has brought the realisation that any scheme to bring about the even partial separation of the two racial groups will cause considerable ill feeling among the citizens of Cape Town and embarrassment to the staff. ... it is thus with little enthusiasm that these proposals are advanced (City of Cape Town 1962).

Central Lending moved into the Sanlam building on 28th July 1962.

Despite the application of separate facilities at Central within a year the provincial administration informed the council that a separate library for ‘coloureds’ had to be established in the city centre. In April 1964 CTCL was threatened with the withholding of their subsidy if separate facilities were not supplied in the city centre (City of Cape Town 1964). Vermeulen felt that it would be more offensive to have totally separate facilities for the different races in one building and recommended renting a space nearby (City of Cape Town 1964). This could be aligned to the National Party policy of equal but separate facilities. In June 1964, the council announced that a separate library would be built in the city centre for ‘non-whites’. This library was two-three blocks away from the Central Library in Wale Street which was contrary to the standard distances that there should be between branches. This was “in order to give effect to the requirements that separate facilities be provided for the different racial groups in this area” (City of Cape Town 1965: 2). The City Park Library opened in 1969. Central Reference was still open to all but with separate tables. Before City Park opened, a meeting was held for the staff of Central Library and Mr Bennet, librarian in charge at City Park, to discuss the implementation. According to the minutes, no problems were expected as “Wynberg has already separated and therefore provides a precedent where the changeover worked smoothly”. It was handled as process, no mention was made that it was wrong or against what libraries stood for. Coloureds and blacks would be allowed to use the Information and Music libraries but not the reference books in the Art room. Librarians were told not to discuss the merits of the new regulation but refer borrowers to the notice and the hand-outs (City of Cape Town 1969). A newspaper article noted that City Park was not wanted (Cape Times 1969).

Woodstock Library

Woodstock library began as a subscription library in 1882 and joined city libraries in 1954

According to the 1959 survey membership was:

- 50% - white
- 50% - coloured

It was difficult to find a site for a ‘non-white’ library due to the problematic nature of area in terms of the Group Areas Act (City of Cape Town 1968). In 1968 council and Department of Community

Development were told they must find a site. Vermeulen noted that ‘We must bring to attention of provincial administration the insuperable practical difficulties of providing a non-white library in accordance with the ordinance’. A separate library was never built at Woodstock

Langa Library

Langa was established in 1921 as residential area (township) for blacks (Muthien, 1994). There was a reading room there from 1934 which the CLEA took over in 1943 and established a library which was incorporated into CTCL in 1952. In 1956 The Bantu Education Amendment Act made libraries for blacks the responsibility of education department and not provincial and municipal authorities (Taylor 1967). Not much changed in the administration of Langa library after the act was proclaimed. It remained part of city libraries.

On 21 March 1960 there were countrywide protests against blacks having to carry passes and 69 people were killed at Sharpeville. There were also protests in Langa which led to the library being burnt down. The fact that Langa library fell under the education department impacted on the rebuilding of the library. In 1960 city libraries recommended that Langa be rebuilt as part of library budget but in 1962 the administrator said that they did not fund black libraries. In July 1963 CTCL was told to transfer Langa to the “Bantu” Administration budget. In 1963 an Interdepartmental Commission of Investigation into Library Services for Non-Whites was appointed. Council decided to wait until the commission decided who was responsible for black libraries. The commission’s recommendation that provincial authorities be responsible was only officially accepted in 1970. In 1968 “Bantu” Administration made funds available to rebuild the library but then the council departments disagreed about who was responsible for the construction. Construction only began in 1969. Langa library opened in July 1970 and it was funded by “Bantu” Administration and administered by CTCL. Nothing was done re libraries for blacks while the fight about responsibility for black libraries and who was to build was ongoing. In the ten years after Langa library burnt down no library service was offered to blacks. They were able to use the reference section at Central and to use the South African Public Library (SAPL) which also had separate tables (Torch 1963). These services were used by very few due to lack of access.

Conclusion segregation

From 1952 mention was made of separate services and staff was treated differently according to their race but apartheid was not immediately implemented in the library service. From 1959 pressure was applied to segregate libraries. In response to this pressure CTCL implemented segregated libraries and separate facilities. The question is why did CTCL not immediately apply separate facilities? A number of reasons have been given:

- CTCL’s budget was limited
- The council did not want to upset coloureds who were still on the municipal voters roll (James and Simons 1989)
- CTCL did not see the urgency for change and believed in gradualism or voluntary segregation

The council did not want to apply separate facilities it seems mainly because of the cost and because most of the libraries were already segregated. There was no great stand that apartheid should not be

allowed in city libraries although there was some dissent in council when the leasing of the Sanlam Building was discussed as separate entrances and reading rooms were planned.

Censorship

Libraries are about access to information but legislation in South Africa impeded this. According to Merrett 'one of the most important tasks of libraries is to combat censorship an every level, of every type and wherever'. In this period there was censorship in many countries. The emphasis was on violence, sex and language but in South Africa race was an added factor. The National Party introduced new legislation to tighten control and it determined what CTCL could offer to patrons. The National Party felt that censorship was needed in SA 'to stop European degeneration and "Bantu" perceptions of western civilization'. (McDonald 2009, p. 24)

The following Legislation was introduced :

- 1962 - General Law Amendment (or Sabotage) Act of 1962 banned people and their writings which meant that black writers and those opposed to the government were not available in libraries and patrons were denied access
- The Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963 allowed books and films to be banned. A system set up to check , books were embargoed

Censorship was not always about content but format, for example, paperback copies were banned but not the hardback copies because the cover was lurid or because of advertisements in the books (Cape Argus 1955).

CTCL and censorship

CTCL responded differently to censorship in the 1950s and the 1960s. Hood, the city librarian, believed that librarians had a duty to facilitate the flow of ideas in the community and that librarians should protest against censorship both as individuals and through their library association (Hood, March 1949). Hood was scathing about the censors and what was censored. He wrote that the books banned in 1954 would only have been considered obscene or subversive if "seen through the eyes of fourteen year old girls or single-minded fanatics". He spoke against the system of censorship which had no appeal and felt that if this continued "South Africa would appear ludicrous in the eyes of the civilised world" (Hood, 1954). Although Hood spoke against censorship the law was still applied. Titles of banned books were sent to libraries and the books were withdrawn.

In 1960s censorship was mentioned with regard to finances and administration. Annual reports noted how many books withdrawn or not supplied, Watts, deputy city librarian, noted that libraries wanted to get books to public as soon as possible. Buying books that could be embargoed and/or banned was considered a waste of funds. Watts spoke of having a 6th sense about what would be banned.

The atmosphere at the time also imposed further censorship. There was Control at book selection, for example, white librarians felt they knew what books coloureds and blacks needed. There was self-censorship both whether religious and political.

Burning books

Burning books is an emotive topic. It has been used through ages as a weapon against groups of people or beliefs. Books that were placed on the banned list had to be destroyed according to the

Custom Act and people in possession of banned books were liable for fines (Cape Times 1955). This led to libraries and individuals burning books that had been banned. Professor Archie Dick has condemned librarians for not opposing censorship and for burning banned books without any protest. He feels that librarians had a special duty to “protect books”. This had been confirmed by Hood in the CTCL annual reports. Dick contends that the librarians knew what was happening as they received lists of books to be withdrawn and there were articles in the newspapers about the burning of books. Although Dick condemned the librarians for what they did, he noted that it could have been because of the authoritarian mood of the time in South Africa and in the library world (Dick 2005). Book burnings did not only take place in Cape Town or public libraries but occurred in other provinces and affected commercial libraries, bookstores and individuals, for example, Hilda Bernstein burnt books in the bath (Merrett 1994 p. 75).

CTCL burnt books but were circumspect about it; the annual reports noted that books were destroyed but not how. Burning books by CTCL was mentioned in newspaper articles. Each time it was the acting or deputy librarian quoted. Interviewees mention books being kept in the chief librarian’s office and in a locked cupboard. A number of incidents involving the burning of books by CTCL have been recorded. In 1957, the deputy city librarian, Zaaiman, said that as soon as the gazette was published the books were recalled and that then a big bonfire was held (Dick 2005). In the first seven months of 1964 CTCL reported that more than 800 books were burnt (Sunday Times 1964). Later in 1964 Watts, acting city librarian, said that several thousand books were burnt every six months (Cape Argus 1964b). One of the principal librarians at head office said “I burnt some books myself in the garden. It was a bit of a fever in the day” (Albert 2013). None of the interviewees can recall anything about books being burnt. They did not even mention that they had heard about the burning of books outside of libraries except for one person.

Conclusion Censorship

What was happening in libraries was reflected in the South African society. Book burnings did not only take place in Cape Town or public libraries but occurred in other provinces and affected commercial libraries, bookstores and individuals, for example, Hilda Bernstein, an anti-apartheid activist, spoke of burning books in the bath (Merrett, 1994, p. 75). Publishers did not buy titles if they thought they would be banned. In the 1950s city libraries spoke out against censorship but this changed in the 1960s. Professor Archie Dick feels that librarians had a special duty to “protect books”, a belief shared by Hood in the CTCL annual reports. Dick contends that the librarians knew what was happening as they received lists of books to be withdrawn and there were articles in the newspapers about the burning of books. Although Dick condemned the librarians for what they did, he noted that it could have been because of the authoritarian mood of the time in South Africa and in the library world (Dick, 2005).

Does it matter whether the books were burnt, pulped or kept in locked cupboard, CTCL complied with the legislation and the books were no longer accessible to the public?

Conclusion

CTCL took longer to segregate libraries than other library services but did in the end with the exception of Woodstock and Central reference. Censorship was also applied. Although the number of libraries, members and book circulation of CTCL increased it was in segregated libraries. CTCL lost in the fight between library philosophy and apartheid legislation.

It was only in 1979 that clause 20, relating to racially segregated facilities, was deleted by the council.

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