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City of Cape Town libraries' segregated history: 1952-1972

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Abstract

This article 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 which brought CTCL into conflict with library philosophy. This legislation determined who the CTCL could serve and where they could serve them. The findings show that CTCL extended the library service to more people and increased the number of facilities, membership and circulation but in a segregated manner. CTCL was not able to meet the library philosophy of free access to all.

Introduction

Cape Town City Libraries (CTCL) was established in 1952; a turbulent period in South African history. The National Party had won the election in 1948 and immediately started legislating segregation. Their aim was the maintenance of a white population as a pure white race and for a South Africa where the white race would remain in control of the government and the finances (Nasionale Party 1968). The Library Ordinances of 1949 and 1955 reinforced the separate facilities aspect. The Bantu Education Act 1953 placed libraries for blacks with the education department rather than the provincial and municipal authorities, as was the case with whites and coloureds. This legislation determined who the CTCL could serve and where they could serve them. The new laws affected all aspects of life in South Africa including library provision and use.

Public libraries are underpinned by a philosophy, which speaks of free and equal access for all. In 1949 UNESCO published its first public library manifesto, which stated that to fulfill its purpose the public library must be readily accessible and its doors open for free and equal use by all members of the community regardless of race, colour, nationality, age, sex, religion, status or educational attainment (Murison 1988).

In 1953 the UNESCO manifesto was adopted as the basis on which national library services would be established in Africa (Olden 1995). CTCL was confronted by two ideologies – one the UNESCO Manifesto of access for all, and the other the apartheid system of segregation which was being implemented by the government. Was CTCL able to implement the manifesto's ideals in the context of a South Africa which was implementing apartheid legislation? In investigating the history of the CTCL from 1952-

1972, and examining the effect of apartheid legislation on a public library system, data was sourced from books, the surviving CTCL archives, interviewing people who worked for CTCL and researching relevant material in the National Library and Archives. This article is based on research done for a mini-thesis, and due to the limitations of a mini-thesis a 20 year period was chosen.

The establishment of CTCL

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 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. These areas would receive a subsidy of at least 50% on expenditure from the province, but significantly it also included a clause that separate facilities would have to be provided for whites and non-whites (Varley 1950). According to Varley (1950), the council was faced with two options, either to have Cape Town declared an urban library area on the assumption 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 1953a). 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).

In December 1951, Bryan Hood was appointed as the City Libraries Development Officer (Anon. 1951). He took up his position on April 23 1952 (City of Cape Town 1957). This was the start of the first free municipal library service in Cape Town.

Segregation legislation

The Group Areas Act 1950, the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act 1953 and the Provincial Library Ordinances of 1949 and 1955 all restricted access to libraries, in contrast to the philosophy of free and equal use of libraries regardless of race, colour and education.

When the library service started in 1952, there were libraries in areas that were racially segregated and libraries in areas with a mixed population. The Group Areas Act meant that as people were moved out of an area the library would be used by one group only. The Separate Amenities Act restricted access to libraries by a group that it was not designated for.

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 to implement the changes (City of Cape Town 1959).

In response, the council requested Hood to submit a report on how CTCL was implementing separate facilities and commissioned a survey of all the libraries (City of Cape Town 1960a). Hood's report did not speak out against the separate facilities clause but noted the financial consequences and suggested that separate libraries for the racial groups would happen given time. The report listed what had been accomplished to implement separate facilities in the library service including:

1. The provision of new and separate libraries in non-white council housing and library depots in factories employing non-white labour; and library depots in factories employing non-white labour;
2. The provision of two travelling libraries giving alternative service to non-whites in predominantly white areas;
3. By drawing to the attention of all new or re-registering borrowers the appropriate clause in the Ordinance and advising them where the alternative library service is to be found; The employment at predominantly white libraries of white professional staff only;
4. The employment and supervision at predominantly non-white libraries by non-white staff only; and
5. Although non-whites may be professionally qualified, at the head office they did not do professional work such as cataloguing, as this would involve working with white staff (City of Cape Town 1961a).

When discussing the Library Ordinance the council had noted that the segregation clause was contrary to its policy but this report shows that it was being implemented.

The survey looked at the number of libraries in CTCL, membership according to race, the racial character of the neighbourhood and the extent to which each library was patronised by white and non-white persons (City of Cape Town 1960a). The majority of libraries (73.5 %) were used by a single racial group (less than 1% of other groups used the library). Only three libraries had high usage by different groups, and of the three only Woodstock had equal use by white and coloured people. The survey noted that "no separate record of borrowers in various categories is kept and these figures are based on estimates by the librarians concerned" (City of Cape Town 1961a).

In January 1961, the acting provincial secretary instructed the council to implement separate facilities. The Provincial Administration used the 1959 survey to determine whether a library was white, black or coloured and instructed the council to apply the following criteria by 8 June 1962:

1. In the 31 libraries where one race uses it predominantly, then the library must be for their use only;
2. The race which is only a small percentage of the users be prohibited from using the branch provided that the existing mobile service is made available to them or new service points be established for them; and

3. In the case of Central, Wynberg and Woodstock libraries, separate libraries for 'European and non-Europeans' to be established within three years (City of Cape Town 1961a).

According to Kruger (1972), after South Africa became a republic in 1961 the pressure increased to implement apartheid in the libraries. The provincial administration withheld subsidies as a threat to force the council to implement Separate facilities. In 1963, the provincial subsidy was approved but on condition that the council report fully on how they were going to apply apartheid in the libraries (Cape Times 1963).

In response to this pressure CTCL planned segregated libraries for Wynberg and Woodstock, and separate facilities for the Central Library (City of Cape Town 1965a). The annual report did not comment on whether this was right or wrong nor protest against the extra effort or expense.

To enforce the separate facilities clause in Wynberg the council leased a building in Bexhill Rd and Castletown Library was opened in 1967. A notice was put up at the Wynberg Library: 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).

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).

The effect of the segregation legislation is further demonstrated by examining two libraries, Central library and Langa library.

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 1961 the council was offered space in the Sanlam building in the city centre (City of Cape Town 1961b). Approval to lease the building was needed from the provincial administration, which would expect separate facilities to be implemented. Hood had said in 1953 that separate facilities would be an issue if the council opened any new central library (City of Cape Town 1953a).

There was disagreement amongst the councillors when they discussed leasing the Sanlam building. Some were opposed to it because of the cost involved and others because separate facilities were 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). On 9th March 1962 the council agreed to lease space in the Sanlam building.

The city librarian, Vermeulen, submitted a report on how separate facilities would be applied. There would be separate entrances on the ground floor but inside the building all races would have equal access to the shelves, and books would be issued from one desk. On the first floor, tables would be set aside for 'Europeans and non-Europeans' and shelves would be used to create boundaries for the reading rooms. 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. In 1963 the provincial administration informed the council that a separate library for 'coloureds' had to be established in the city centre. The council argued that they had only leased the Sanlam building after submissions to the provincial administration and could not now be expected to provide entirely separate libraries (City of Cape Town 1963a). In April 1964, the provincial administration threatened to withhold the subsidy if separate facilities were not supplied in the city centre (City of Cape Town 1964a).

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 1964a). In June 1964, the council announced that a separate library would be built in the city centre for 'non-whites'. This library was two 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 1965a: 2).

The City Park Library was completed in 1967 but only opened in 1969 because of problems with the building. Vermeulen noted "it is with great regret that all 'non-white' members of the Central Library were being asked to transfer their membership to the new library" (Cape Argus 1969). The reference library in Wale Street 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." The process of segregation included:

1. A notice board put up at Central Lending and hand-out leaflets to inform borrowers of the new situation;
2. All 'non-white members' to transfer to City Park; and
3. 'Non-white' messengers to only be served at the desk and staff to select the books.

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 to refer borrowers to the notice and the hand-outs (City of Cape Town 1969a). The minutes do not include any protest against what was happening.

Langa Library

When the CTCL started in 1952, Langa was the only library in a black township. By 1955, Langa Library, housed in a wooden prefabricated building, needed larger premises due to increased membership, lack of shelf space and the need for a quiet study space (City of Cape Town 1955a). In 1956 public libraries for blacks became the responsibility of the Department of Bantu Education (Taylor 1967: 66). This would have a drastic effect on the provision of libraries for blacks in Cape Town.

There was no perceptible change in the way Langa Library was treated by CTCL after 1956. Langa Library was part of the library service even though the Native Affairs Department was responsible for salaries, the building and assets (City of Cape Town 1960b).

On 21 March 1960 Langa Library was burnt down during protests against the carrying of passes. This event was described by Mr Sixaba, the librarian on duty at the time:

At 6.30 p.m. on Monday, 21st March 1960, I opened the above library as usual. At 7.15 pm unrest increased and, although I had no suspicion of the intention of the rioters, I decided to close the library and locked it just after 7.15 p.m. The rioters were near the St Cyprian's Church, being about 100 in number, some being highly excited. They surrounded the library, some trying to force an entrance, and at 7.30 p.m. I had nearly reached St. Cyprians Church when the rioters set fire to the building. I could not persuade them not to set it on fire (City of Cape Town 1960b).

Hood recommended that the library be rebuilt and the council requested the city engineer and the city librarian to draw up plans (City of Cape Town 1960c).

The plans were approved and Langa Library was included on the CTCL budget. The provincial administrator once again exercised control over CTCL and insisted that Langa Library be removed from the budget because the provincial administration would not subsidise expenditure on libraries for blacks.

In July 1963 Langa Library was moved from the library budget to the Bantu Administration budget (City of Cape Town 1963b). The council decided to wait for the recommendations of the Interdepartmental Commission of Investigation into Library Services for 'non-whites', appointed in 1963, before making a decision about Langa Library (City of Cape Town 1964b). The commission recommended that the provincial authorities be responsible for providing library services to all population groups in cooperation with local authorities, but these recommendations were only formally accepted in June 1970 (Musiker 1986).

The Department of Bantu Administration made funds available to build Langa Library in 1968 and construction began in 1969. The libraries were funded by Bantu Administration and administered by CTCL (City of Cape Town 1969b).

According to Cobley (1997), the priority of the state was not to increase the provision of libraries to blacks but to control and police it. This is demonstrated by the fact that Langa Library was only opened in 1970, ten years after it burnt down.

Did CTCL oppose the legislation?

CTCL did not apply all the apartheid legislation immediately, but there was always talk of a parallel library service for blacks and coloureds. When pressured by provincial administration to apply legislation, council said it could not do it immediately as it did not have the finances, and at times, it was not necessary. Hood spoke of the necessity of a policy of gradualism. He observed that “the problem will sort itself out to some extent with the gradual implementation of the Group Areas Act” (Hood 1959: 474). This was in line with the council’s policy of voluntary segregation (Torch 1961).

CTCL was against separate facilities for Central and Wynberg libraries, as evidenced by quotes by Vermeulen and reports by Watts (an Acting City Librarian). This does not imply that the council was against separate facilities but only against how it was applied. Watts said it would be wasteful, inefficient and impossible to offer equal services if separate facilities were applied to the Sanlam building (Cape Times 1961). Vermeulen did not openly speak out against apartheid, but when discussing Central Library moving to the Sanlam building noted that separate facilities would be “insulting to our non-European patrons” (City of Cape Town 1964a).

Documents relating to the new library service reveal how apartheid was applied. A pamphlet about the new library service noted that members could use any library in the system but also that a parallel system was being developed for the non-European population (City of Cape Town 1953b). It does not explain how this would work. Library regulations drawn up for the new service had to be sent to the provincial administrator for approval. The regulations were approved with two amendments. The first was that CTCL could not impose a charge for light fiction and the second was to include a separate facilities clause to which the council agreed (City of Cape Town 1953c). Hood’s response to the demand for a special facilities amendment highlights the obfuscation of the time:

At present no library facilities operated by council are specifically set aside for the exclusive use of any particular race and no such provision was made in the regulation. Separate facilities are being provided at different points but are not expressly delineated as such (City of Cape Town 1953c).

On one hand CTCL libraries were open for all, but there were also separate facilities. Interestingly, the 1953 annual report only noted that the clause about charging for light fiction was not approved, no mention was made of having to include the separate facilities clause. Was it because there were still coloured voters on the council voters roll and the council wanted to create an illusion of a non-racial city (James and Simons 1989)? In reports to the council, Hood (1955) wrote about the policy of gradualism and what was accomplished to implement separate facilities. This was not spoken about publicly. A 1955 pamphlet noted that members could use any library but “are expected to draw their books, as far as possible, at the libraries at which they enrol” (City of Cape Town 1955b). The Group Areas Act was already in place and people were being moved from mixed

residential areas. By expecting members to use libraries where they joined, presumably where they lived, seemed that the council wanted segregated libraries without having to say libraries were segregated.

CTCL complied with legislation although not always immediately. CTCL said separate facilities were not policy, but there were mobile libraries for non-whites in white areas. From 1965 all new libraries were designated for a particular race group. It can be noted that all city council departments were being pressurised to implement apartheid. A list of beaches and how to allocate them was sent to council, as had been done for libraries (City of Cape Town 1965b).

How did legislation affect staff and their work?

Until 1963 the staff of the extension libraries (a euphemism for libraries for coloureds), who were all coloured, worked at head office in the mornings and then went to their own libraries in the afternoons. They had to process books, file cards, write overdue notices, and shelve books at white libraries (Jansen 2013). “The hours of extension libraries were dictated by the need for people to work on the [processing] belt” (Naiker 2013). White staff at branches did not have to do this. “So called coloured workers had to do all the dirty work at head office before going out to the branches” (Jansen 2013). In the mornings they were library attendants and in the afternoon librarians.

This practice of coloured staff working at head office in the morning and then going to their own libraries was only stopped in 1963. After an investigation into staffing, permanent staff was appointed to the processing department and extension staff only worked in their own libraries (City of Cape Town 1964c).

At head office the work people performed was decided by their racial group: The other jobs in cataloguing, and requests... were primarily white, whether they were qualified or not, that was where the segregation came in. There were no whites in processing (Naiker 2013).

This is confirmed by Hood’s report on how separate facilities were being applied in the library service:

At the head office Non-whites, although they may be professionally qualified, do not do professional work such as cataloguing, as this would involve working with white staff (City of Cape Town 1961a).

Staff response to apartheid

The effect of apartheid legislation on the library service became more apparent and intense over the years. In the fifties there were still mixed libraries. A staff member who worked for the service in the 1950s felt that it was an extremely liberal staff.

As far as staff I did not come across anyone who approved of the new dispensation. Wynberg library was still mixed. Certainly Woodstock library was mixed and it was mixed in all the libraries (Dubow 2013).

Another mentioned that there was no colour bar in libraries, but also that there were no blacks in the libraries. Most of the staff seemed to have accepted the legislation and its effects on the service even if they did not agree with it. Kolbe said that in the 1960s they 'dutifully' put up the whites only signs (Kolbe 1990). People interviewed said that they put up the ordinance although some indicated that they did not apply it. A white principal librarian came to City Park Library and asked about a person in the library who looked white. She said that he was not supposed to be there and Naiker (one of my interviewees) responded:

in fact he is not white he is coloured and you can now see my problem, how to differentiate on physical looks alone who is white or not. If you want me to enforce it then you have to entitle me to ask for ID documents. That afternoon Mr Vermeulen's secretary phoned and said he wanted to see me. He said I only want to tell you one thing; you let anyone use that library and if anyone tells you otherwise refer them to me (Naiker 2013).

Shirley Jansen, who had been librarian in charge at Lansdowne library for many years, relates an incident at the Lansdowne library where a white person wanted to use the library and a patron at the library insisted she not be helped:

A lecturer from UCT wanted to use library and the patron was furious – said she must go, it's not your library, we did not make the rules – read there on the board. She was going on and I said I am sorry if you did not ask we would have ignored and treated you as a normal person but you asked and you are white so you have to leave and go to Claremont (Jansen 2013).

Some white librarians enforced apartheid in libraries using the excuse that it was the law:

I must say that most of the separation and inequalities was brought about by the personal feelings of the librarians themselves. They went out of their way to impose this and you would not realise this because it was very subtle until you have a wide range and you can see where it differs (Naiker 2013).

A library that was mixed would become a library for only one group by people being forcibly moved from residential areas. Naiker, who was librarian at the Janet Bourhill library in the 1960s, remembers the affect it had on that library:

Harfield Road was a mixed community before the group areas started. Lots of immigrants came to library and it was an opportunity to meet a diverse group of people. There was good mix in the library, it was a social centre, people got to know each other and there were lots of lonely people put into flats by their children. The library was multicultural, across socioeconomic lines and racial lines. Then group areas came in and these people were moved out, it was sad to see the effect on them. It also affected the nature of the library, the whole atmosphere (Naiker 2013).

A survey from 1960 indicated that Janet Bourhill library members were 85% coloured, 10% white and 5% black (City of Cape Town 1961a).

Coloured staff at mixed libraries had to deal with racism from patrons. In a letter of complaint to the City Librarian about Lansdowne library, a patron referred to the librarian in charge as “the new coloured boy in charge” (Boyle 1956).

Petty apartheid amongst staff

Even if people in the service were not openly racist, the non-white staff members were still subjected to petty apartheid which demeaned them. Shireen Osman mentions an incident at head office when coloured staff members were waiting for a meeting and a white librarian came in and turned off the lights without saying anything:

We were sitting in the dark and had to open the curtains, they thought it was funny. Lydia Pienaar [head of the Children’s Section] came in and wanted to know what we were doing. We told her and it never happened again (Osman 2013). When you went to H.O. you greeted everyone but not all greeted back - they looked at you – ‘Who are you?’ Those were the early years (Osman 2013).

Analysis of the interviews reveals that, depending on racial classification, staff remember the times differently. In general whites felt that there was not discrimination within the libraries even if there was in the outside world.

Coloured staff remember it differently – less pay, longer hours, being made to work as shelvers or book processors before going to their own libraries, less money at book selection, and less control of what they bought for their libraries. Then there were the indefinable moments, such as not being greeted. Some interviewees noted that the staff was liberal but others felt that this liberalism was tokenism. People showed their true selves by insisting on applying the laws and hiding behind the excuse that they had to because it was the law.

Veiled acquiescence

These memories reflect what had been happening in libraries in the 1940s. Varley, the chief librarian of SAPL, said that librarians wanted to provide libraries to all members of the community and were not concerned about race (Varley 1950). However separate facilities and parallel library services were part of the first discussions about a free municipal library service. The scheme for a free library service that the SAPL presented to Cape Town City Council in 1938, included a proposal for a “parallel chain of branch libraries in ‘non- European’ communities” (Varley 1941b).

The Cape Libraries Extension Association (CLEA) annual reports reflect control of books sent to libraries. Initially crime books were not provided at Langa library as it was feared that it would influence patrons negatively. When Peter Blum was appointed supervisor he allocated crime books to Langa as he felt that patrons should be allowed to read what they wanted to (Cape Libraries Extension Association 1948: 5). However in 1951 he complained because according to him, Langa residents had no “sensible requests” (Cape Libraries Extension Association 1951: 6).

Could the council have refused the subsidy and run the service on its own? In 1963 the cost of running the CTCL was R433 479, made up of

1. R32 650 revenue from libraries;
2. R200 415 from rates; and
3. R200 414 subsidy from provincial administration (City of Cape Town 1963c).

The council had already shown that it was not willing to fund the library service fully and had accepted the provincial ordinance even though it contained a separate facilities clause (City of Cape Town 1950). CTCL was not able to keep up with the demand for new libraries, and with a reduced budget the service offered to Capetonians would have been affected. Even if council had given the required budget this does not imply that there would have been a non-segregated service. CTCL had shown that it did apply separate facilities but wanted to do it in its own way (City of Cape Town 1961a). The City of Johannesburg Library Service did not accept the provincial administration subsidy but still ran a segregated library service.

Conclusion

On one hand CTCL was more open than other services in the country but there was segregation from the start. CTCL brought free services to a much wider audience. Circulation statistics show a steady rise in all libraries in the service, membership increased and in 20 years the number of libraries grew from eight service points in 1952 to 45 service points in 1972. In 1972 approximately 29% of the population were members of the service compared to 4.4% in 1941.

CTCL allowed itself to be threatened by the political circumstances and did not challenge legislation meaningfully. The political climate led to a library service that did not meet the library philosophy. At a period in time when libraries in countries such as the United States of America were slowly moving towards open libraries for all, CTCL was moving in the opposite direction. CTCL was not able to establish a service in line with library philosophy of free and equal access to all.

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