Libraries and their history represent an important part of the intellectual and political life in South Africa and were nodes in the control and production of knowledge in the apartheid era. This is the terrain of Kalley’s book, a version of her doctoral thesis at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg. As Reuben Musiker notes in his foreword, long before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission undertook its interrogation of apartheid calumny, Kalley had begun to document the experiences of African librarians and libraries in the second half of the twentieth century. She offers a detailed political economy of public, provincial and community libraries in the Transvaal as case-studies of librarianship in the country as a whole. The narrative focuses on apartheid ideology, legislation and policy in the making of libraries. She reads apartheid as the extension of segregation in line with recent historiography, but goes back to the colonial roots of library development in South Africa.

Chapter 2 is extremely detailed in its description of how public libraries emerged in South Africa, but more particularly in the Transvaal, and it looks at developments among whites, Indians, Coloureds and Africans from the 1920s. Kalley examines the substantial role of the Johannesburg Public Library in challenging the racial divide in most libraries, tracing this back to as early as 1905. The South African Library Association also promoted a more equitable library service for Africans and recommended more open access to libraries with reference facilities as well as a better supply of study material for black students. Like most recommendations of this era, however, apartheid officials acceded only where finances permitted and developments were very uneven. Tables of statistics for each province from the 1950s to 1980s offer a comparison of relative black and white membership of libraries and their holdings.

The third chapter compares and evaluates resources and services in Transvaal libraries, concentrating mainly on collection-development policy and the various attempts “to bring all libraries to the same standard…[which] represents a fundamental shift in emphasis” (p.77). Kalley argues that library discourse changed from one about cultural enrichment and leisure for mainly white users to another, centred on literacy and a culture of learning for mainly black users, through the acquisition of relevant materials designed to promote improved educational standards and knowledge. A statistical review at the end of the chapter provides an inventory of Transvaal library services from 1952 to 1992.

Chapter 4 concentrates on empirical research based on a questionnaire sent to all independent libraries and a selection of one hundred other libraries, serving both blacks and whites. The results were disappointing and
one is left with the impression that findings are likely to be misleading since they are based on only twelve responses. More disquieting is that only three of the eighteen black libraries responded. Kalley’s comparison of six black libraries with six white libraries is interesting, if problematic. For example, she compares Boipatong with Vanderbijlpark, Katlehong with Alberton, Mhluzi with Middelburg, Mamelodi with Vredefort (now Centurion), etc. The comparison looks at how the different municipalities funded these libraries. The results are, however, predictable: black libraries were hopelessly underfunded and catered for school children only. They were also adversely affected by the political violence of the 1980s. Vosloorus, near Boksburg, was, however, different. It became a community library in 1985 and introduced literacy classes and skills training to the unemployed.

This leads on to a short chapter on community libraries in the Transvaal as a whole. Not surprisingly, township and rural library services were neglected, but some became the focus of an enterprise to empower local people, for example, the YMCA Library in Orlando which was run as a co-operative venture with a local drama group. Books were donated by various international agencies, especially the United States Information Service which had its own mission to promote American policy in South Africa. Fulbright scholars and other American visitors were encouraged to address the Soweto community from the Ipelegeng Community Centre Library. Other community libraries concentrated on informal adult education and teacher development. The Urban Foundation was active in providing resources at the Funda Centre in Diepkloof where the library became the integrating element in educational activities. Chapter 6 offers a case study of librarianship in Alexandra Township. After a brief history of the township, Kalley focuses on the states of emergency and the upgrading of teaching. The latter part of this empirical study traces the progress and development of a community library in Alexandra Township between 1991 and 1994 under the auspices of Project Acorn.

The last chapter attempts to bring the thesis up to date, especially in respect of libraries for mainly African communities. It therefore looks at the Zaaiman Report and its reformist impulses. Kalley also investigates the role of the South African Institute for Librarianship and Information Science (SAILIS). The National Advisory Council for Libraries and Information Report of the Department of National Education in 1988 also receives some attention because of its startling verdict that library and information services were not essential to educational provision. Other critical initiatives in the maelstrom of late apartheid politics in the 1990s are catalogued, ending with an assessment of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) Report based on the findings of a visit to South Africa in 1993 which dealt mainly with the social context of library delivery. The vicissitudes of recent library organisational politics in competing professional associations, such as SAILIS, the African Library Association of South Africa (ALASA) and the Library and Information Workers Organisation (LIWO), bring the analysis to its conclusion.

As this summary of its contents indicates, Kalley’s book provides a compendious reference work of the development of libraries in South Africa in the twentieth century. It therefore represents an important source for understanding the institutional aspects of information dissemination during the apartheid era. Since so few monographs on the history of South African librarianship are ever published, Kalley’s work is likely to become a standard text. It suffers the usual defects of a doctoral thesis that has been turned into a book, especially its sometimes tedious description and methodological genuflections. Kalley also tends to lose chronological coherence in various places which is confusing for readers unfamiliar with time and place in South African social history. The research for the book is rather dated, having been completed some years ago. Moreover, it simply ploughs the deep ideological furrows of apartheid intellectual politics which sometimes leads to unsophisticated judgements based purely on liberal sentiment or conven-
ational interpretations. The title of the book is misleading because it promises a history of South African libraries, or at least those in the former Transvaal, but delivers only an analysis of some public and community libraries in the region. These quibbles notwithstanding, Kalley’s book will find its way onto reading lists in library schools, if they can afford the prohibitive cost, and historians will consult it in search of data on the control of knowledge through information provision in South Africa.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5834

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.