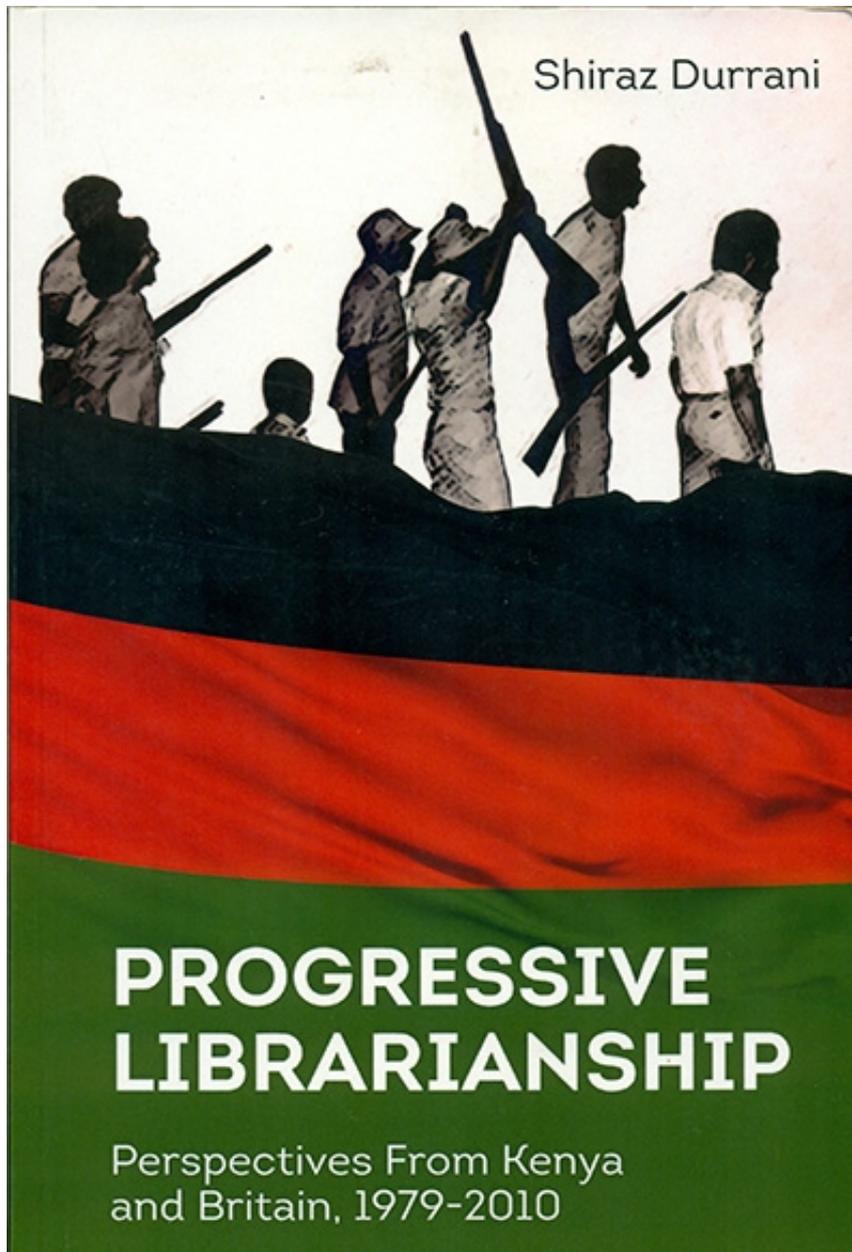


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Progressive librarianship: perspectives from Kenya and Britain 1979-2010



Progressive librarianship does not sound like a very dramatic profession, but it is. Shiraz Durrani recounts in a scholarly way his and others' experiences in the information sciences, which are, as several scholars have pointed out, never neutral sciences. He describes progressive librarianship as having an activist agenda to increase awareness of the social, political and economic reality we live in, including its power relations. Thus it is an engine of democracy "serving the cause of justice and equality for all in the society, particularly those oppressed and exploited under the current system" (P.58).

What this means is spelled out systematically in the different sections of the book, first in the long introduction in theoretical and disciplinary terms then in concrete terms in sections on the Kenyan and British experiences (both of which are histories, the Kenyan one in particular containing harrowing details), followed by a chapter on national and international experiences and finally two short sections on how to move forward, the last one being more or less a study guide.

Librarianship carries a social responsibility to inform and progressive librarianship is a worldwide movement that is organized with a vision of a just and equal information society. Beyond the vision there is a commitment to organization and action. The Progressive Librarians Guild began in the USA in 1939 and in other places such as Sweden, Austria, the UK, Argentina, Mexico and South Africa at later dates, the last-named beginning in 1990, for example, although there were undoubtedly underground organizations earlier.

Kenya, which is documented in detail because of the author's role in it, is an interesting case, beginning in the 1970s, during a time of intense political repression including suppression of information. The importance of the book as a historical record is here, with original documents reproduced to tell the story of the December Twelve Movement (and Library Cell started in 1977) and the Mwakenya political party. This critical part of Kenya's modern history, which has been distorted by authoritarian and/or biased accounts (or the lack thereof) is set down here by someone who was not only a witness and active participant but is also a responsible scholar.

Durrani traces the roots of the December Twelve Movement (DTM, named for Kenya's Independence Day in 1963) back to the Mau Mau or Land and Freedom Army, which had a highly organized communications program operating underground from 1952, but reaching the 35,000 freedom fighters. It had printing presses and cyclostyling machines and produced posters and handbills as well as its newspaper. Noteworthy was the role of Kenya's Asian community in making this communications program operational. DTM studied and emulated this model, producing and distributing printed material both "over ground" and underground.

The DTM Library Cell was an intrinsic part of the execution of this model. Though underground, it was based at the University of Nairobi Library. Apart from print material, the cell also operated through theatre, poetry, meetings and organization-building. The University of Nairobi Library Magazine was a tool for educating and engaging library workers even as they communicated with others, as through the 1979 Kabete Library and Agrivet Workshop. *Sehemu ya Utungaji* was the creative wing of the Library Cell, and public plays such as Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Ngaahika Ndeenda* at Kamirithu Community Education and Cultural Centre, *Kinjikitile Maji Maji* and plays in Gujarati were part of the "over ground" activities of DTM activists. The underground newspaper *Pambana* and the Mwakenya party which challenged the neo-colonial rule of KANU are dealt with briefly as they form the context of the Library Cell.

Though not underground, these public activities of the Library Cell attracted severe repression from the regime and this is also documented in Durrani book, including interrogations by the security services, imprisonment and torture. Such was the price of questioning the official control of information and offering an alternative interpretation.

The section on The British Experience again documents library activities, this time in Hackney, a London Borough, where Durrani worked after his exile from Kenya in the 1980s. The issues addressed are those of racial inequalities and the access to and creation of information by racial minorities. This section again documents an important period of history. The details of how such struggles are conducted and the assessment of the outcomes in the short and longer term are invaluable.

Throughout, the book maintains a critique, questioning Western political and economic thinking, which has seen marketization as the only way of organizing societies. This is a serious academic and political question, which people, whether in Kenya or Britain or anywhere else, should be free to ask, discuss and find answers to. Asking it should not lead to repression and certainly not to torture.

I have a few quibbling criticisms of the book. First, Vita Books, like many publishers these days, should really have better proof readers. I wonder if they do any proofreading at all, or whether they had an editor to advise and support the author? Probably not, and it shows. Second, and probably my major criticism, while extremely valuable as a work of historical record and analysis of this groundbreaking discipline, some of the political analysis in the text borders on tired leftist orthodoxy which is out-of-date.

I have to give some examples to point out what I mean. Some of the discussion about gender equality and agriculture (subjects I care a lot about) contain unanalyzed and questionable statements such as "the basis of (women's exploitation) was...forced on them by multinational companies", "dividing us on the basis of sex was one of many divisive tactics of our enemy", "if the rich women felt oppressed it was a very superficial oppression" (p159-60), and others implying that alternative (to capitalist) systems of agriculture would allow Kenya to produce surpluses as in other non-imperialist countries such as China, Cuba, Nicaragua and North Korea (pp 104 and 171).

I readily admit that these statements are historically contextualized in the book, but some analytical comment would have been helpful. The gender assertions are indeed counteracted by later quotations from Kenyan women who articulate their inequality with men and assert that men are not going to do anything about it (pp 163-4). This validates the progressive librarianship method of engaging communities, including women, in articulating their situation. The agricultural analysis is not likewise developed however. I would like to comment that the large-scale industrial model of capitalist agriculture is indeed faulty and does not lead to food security for many people. But neither did the large-scale communist model of collective farms. Local markets for food are much more effective. Understanding and organizing food "From Farm to Fork" seems a better way to go.

These minor irritants apart, this is an important book, especially for Kenyans wanting to understand their history. The critical role played by Asian Kenyans in the history recounted in the section on The Kenyan Experience is an eye opener.

By Shiraz Durrani
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