THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CLASSIFICATION SCHEME AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

BY

J. T. ALERA1YE,

Division of Agricultural Colleges, A.B.U. Zaria

ABSTRACT

Quite a lot has been written on the inadequacies of the Library of Congress Classification Scheme on Africa. The deeper the research into the scheme, the more facts come up to prove these observations.

This write-up is yet another area in which Africa has not been given fair treatment. The scheme is still popular in Third World countries especially in academic libraries. Hence, the feeling remains high that more should be done in the treatment of this continent.

African 'Traditional Religion, which this study examines, cannot be separated from a thorough study of African life as a whole. African studies continue to change and expand in research institutions. Thus, highlighting one more inadequacy of the library of Congress will not only aid scholarship on Africa in particular but can he useful to the Library of Congress itself The study tries to see how African traditional religion has been treated in the Library of Congress Classification Scheme and concludes by advocating improvements in the way the scheme has classified African Traditional Religion.

INTRODUCTION

The widespread acceptance and use of the library of congress scheme in large libraries is not in doubt. For reason of patriotism some libraries try to shunt it aside. Even world class libraries – like the British Library do no completely ignore it. As a scheme of classification it has a lot to be said for it and university libraries in Africa or at least in Nigeria have embraced it for its many good qualities.

However, in the course of this acceptance, librarians have come to discover some flaws which are impediments to its easy application. Over time, classification analyst like Balanti et al, Ejiko 1977, Kisiedu, 1976, Ndakotsu 1998, Amankwe, Amaeshi among others have taken either cursory or otherwise looks at these flaws either in parts of generally. Their verdicts have not varied: African has not been adequately treated in the scheme (and, of course, in the other major schemes).

Scholars of classification are very much aware of the "literary warrant" which is one of the pillars of the scheme. But that argument is on a shaky ground when we remind ourselves revision of some classes. The argument also flies in the face of the undeniable fact that materials about Africa, from Africa, and by Africans are part of the "publication explosion" witnessed in the world of knowledge before the information scene got overwhelmed by it

THE PROBLEM

One document, by one author, cannot do justice to the issue of the treatment of Africa in the L.C. scheme. Thus, many analysis have chosen to put the focus in particular areas, some of them in the form of theses and dissertations. E.g. Ejiko (1977, (History); Kisied 1976 (Anthropology); Ndakotsu, (African music). In addition, Ampitan, 1978 (Education), have worked on it at the bachelor's degree level.

Other Nigerians have analysed other less specific aspects of this problem: Adamu 1986 (Islamic topics); Gomina (Africana) while yet others have looked into the various modifications made in individual libraries as a way of taking care of the problem. One of these is Akinpelu, 1987; Nkwo, who made a study on BL BL-B4 (religion) which of

course did not recommended analytical home grown version.

Amankwe.

This paper focuses on African Traditional Religion, a completely neglected part of Religion in library of congress, which is an indispensable part of any study and research on African life.

The whole range of BL - BX, Part II in the LC scheme is given to religion but the allocation for Africa is this:

BL

2400	-	490 African Religions
2420	-	2460 Egypt
2462	-	North Africa
2463	-	South Africa
2464	-	East Africa
2465	-	West Africa
2466	-	Central Africa
2470	-	By country, A - Z

e.g

BL	2470	D3 Dahomey
BL	2470	G6 Ghana
BL	2470	G8 Guinea
BL	2470	M3 Madagascar
BL	2470	M6 Morocco
BL	2470	N3 Nigeria

The total range of numbers given to African Religion by the scheme is 91 out of which Egypt alone has 40, leaving 51 to be shared by the rest. Granted that Egypt especially as one of the greatest civilizations of old has a rich history including that of religion, it

seems as if the old stereotype of Africa having no past has been put to play. The whole of West Africa is given just one number, 2465 and Nigeria squeezed along with every other individual African country with just a cutter number - BL 2470.N3! This gross imbalance stands in sharp relief when it is noted that BL, is set aside for traditional religions of the world from which the range 1000 - 2370 is for Asia alone under which individual countries are well catered for.

A Proposed Classification Structure

African traditional religion deals with concepts, beliefs, and practices among the peoples of Africa. Traditional concepts still form the bedrock of the behaviour of many Africans, although this may differ from place to place. Existence itself, to the African, is a religious phenomenon. Talbot (1962) in examining the religion of the inhabitants of the southern provinces of Nigeria identified four main elements, viz: polytheism, Jnthroll1orphism, animism and ancestor workshop. Some or all of these elements, undoubtedly can be seen in almost every African society.

What is, however, indisputably common to all is the belief in an almighty God who as the creator is the giver of rain and sunshine, the omnipresent, the wise one, the all seeing. This however does not preclude belief in other lesser Gods.

Religion plays such a prominent role in the lives of the African people that it is expressed in multifarious ways: in songs, myths and legends, folk tales, proverbs, sayings, etc.

Generally speaking, religion is what ties man to a divine or supernatural power, and in which these relations have been expressed. The belief in the existence of such relations is a general human conviction common to all people and to all stages of culture. God remains the object of workshop.

In constructing an acceptable scheme for African Traditional Religion \ an important factor should always be kept in mind - the heterogeneity of the religions which vary from society to society, from ethnic group to ethnic group. The frame work should be tailored in a way that some basic elements of religion would not be ignored. Examples of this are some peculiar aspects of African Traditional Religion like witchcraft, idol

worship, spirit worship, rain worship etc.

The pre-Arab Egypt of the Pharaohs is a case in point which had a whole pantheon of gods, each with its own adherence before Ra, the semi-god was elevated to the supreme position. That Egypt is not much different from the Africa which is being considered in this write-up.

The structure should flow in tandem with what obtains in the study of religion in any society: beginning with the belief systems, the universe and world view of the people; their perception of god(s) and myths that bind the society, and the origin of that religion that is peculiar to it. These are the fundamental, abstract and basic elements.

Next is the relationship between man and the supernatural, the concept of the supreme God, then the deities and spirits, down to the ancestors who in many societies are believed to have metamorphosed into the gods of the tribes. Expression of belief in the supreme and the lesser gods is through worship and other rites and rituals. Communing with these, however requires having them represented by concrete objects - idols and totems - in sacred place like shrines.

Though the gods are for the community, they cannot be approached by all and sundry. Thus we have the priests. Magic, sorcery, witchcraft, divination, charms and amulets are the realistic manifestations of African Traditional Religion which European "experts" never saw as such.

The classification structure has attempted to construct a logical link between the unseen and the seen with all the intermediary elements between them.

Egypt, as should be expected, presents a unique case. Unlike, the rest of Africa, traditional religion in Egypt belongs to eras long gone. Yet there can be no talk of Egyptian civilization to the exclusion of its gods. Ancient Egyptian religion revolved around the sun and the Nile. Ra, the sun-god was declared the state god, while Osiris controlled the Nile, the soil and the vegetation. These two were central but each district possessed its own god or gods. Indeed what obtained in Egypt was a complex array of gods and goddesses when Ra spat out of his mouth shu, the god of air, and Tefnut, the goddess or moisture. All the others were procreated by these two.

Ethnologists have similarly established the mythical theologies of individual African societies some as complex as that of ancient Egypt.

Basic classification structure

The basic structure for classifying African Traditional Religion is thus proposed:

A. Belief systems Cosmology Pantheons Mythology

Origin of the religion

B Supreme God

Deities, Gods

Spirits

Ancestors

Divine Rulers

C Worship

Rites/Ritual

Prayers/Incantations

Invocations

Sacrifices

Ceremonies/Festivals

D Symbols

Shrines, Sacred grounds

Statuettes, Idols

Totems

E. Priesthood

Initiation

Grades

Functions

Paraphernalia

Cults, Guilds, Societies

F Manifestations

Magic,

Sorcery

Witchcraft

Divination

Cham1s, Amulets,

Talismans Trance,

Possession

Taboos

This will be the framework for the schedule. Since the proposal is based on the LC, it goes therefore that it needs to be accommodated within the scheme's notation. Sub-classes BY and BZ, as far as we know at present are still unused. Any of them can be adapted with the synopsis thus:

1- 99 General

100 - 999 Northern Africa

000 - 4999 Western Africa

5000 - 7999 Eastern Africa

8000 - 8999 Central Africa

9000 - 9999 Southern Africa

Within these range of numbers, each country will be allocated 100 numbers or more as the case may be. However, in building the numbers for continental, regional, and country considerations, the basic structure will be considered always.

But the most important element is the number - building on tribal basis as traditional religion is tribe - based. Under each country numbers will be allocated to individual tribes and the same pattern in the basic structure will be applied. Where there is a spill-over above the numbers given for tribal groups, cutter numbers can be adopted, with tables constructed on the same pattern of the basic structure

A. Myongo tribe (cutter number)

M9

Belief systems

M91

Deities

M91 x (cutter for god)

B. Zanaki tribe (one number)

5456

Belief systems

5456.3

(cutter for deity)

In all cases, the basic structure remains as the tool for subdividing.

Conclusion

Though colonialism and to a great extent, Islam and Christianity, have whittled Africa's religions and belief systems, its religions form a very solid part of any study of its part. Anthropologists have done much, but Africa is still a continent waiting to be discovered in many other aspects.

Since it is scholars who would carry out this discovery and their findings inevitably must be published, the need for a very accommodating classification scheme is great. LC's popularity with Africa's higher institutions of learning makes it the choice of the scheme that needs to be comprehensively revised for this purpose.

Western intellectuals have somehow established the thinking that Africa's traditional practices are all in the purview of tribal studies and anthropologists have since sustained this position. Religions of Africa are therefore not considered as part of world religions. Thus in LC while BP - BX accommodates all Western and Eastern religions including cults and sects, Africa is still left under anthropology, GN.

It is hoped that a study of this type will help correct these misconceptions and put Africa on an equal footing with the rest of the world.

REFERENCES

Adamu, Mohammed Maude (1986). "The treatment of Islamic topics in the Library of Congress Subject Headings". Unpublished M.L.S. Thesis - ABU

Akinpelu, G.O (1987) "The study of the modifications made to the Library of Congress Class B. Part II BL - BX: Religion in some libraries in Nigeria with recommendations as to their adoption nationally". Paper presented at the NLA cataloguing and classification seminar. University of Jos, Makurdi campus.

Ampitan, E I (1978). A comparative study of the Dewey Decimal classification and Library of congress classification in their treatment of the subject "Education", with reference to Kashim Ibrahim Library and Advanced Teachers' College Library Zaria.Unpublished B.L.S. Thesis - ABU

Ejiko, Emmanuel O. (1977). The adequacy of library of congress scheme in classifying Africana materials with a revised schedule for the History of Nigeria. Unpublished M.L.S. Thesis, A.B.U.

Gomina, Eammanuel A (1978). The treatment of Africana in Dewey Decimal Classification: a critical analysis with suggestions for improvement based on the application of Dewey in Africana section of Kaduna State Library Service. Unpublished B.L.S. Thesis A.B.U.

Ndakotsu, Tsuzon M (1999). Classification of African music in libraries, Zaria Journal of Librarianship Vol. 3no.1&2 P. 27-36.

Nkwo, S D (1996). Proposals for modifying the Dewey Decimal Classification Scheme for Africana. Seminar on the cataloguing and classification of Africana. Institute of Librarianship, University of Ibadan Unpublished paper.