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Notes on Operations Classifying African Literary Authors

Marilyn A. Green and Susan Rathbun-Grubb

This paper reviews the literature on the inadequacies of the Library of Congress Classification (LCC) schedules for African literary authors and describes a modified practice that collocates African literature and facilitates patron browsing. Current LCC practice scatters African literature across the multiple European language classifications of former colonial powers. Future strategies could place individual authors more accurately in the context of their country, region, culture, and languages of authorship. The authors renew the call for a formal international effort to revisit the literature schedules and create new classification practices for African literature.

“who can imagine an effective cataloger who exalts means over ends and cataloging rules over library service?”¹

The objective of this paper is to share a classification decision and practice, devised by one of the authors for use at her academic library that could be adopted by other libraries with similar needs and concerns. Specifically, it addresses the classification of African literary authors—the historical classification practices in the context of world history and future practices aimed at consistently applying cataloging principles and improving service to library patrons. The International Federation of Library Associations’ (IFLA) Statement of International Cataloguing Principles states that the needs of library users must always take precedence: “at the beginning of the 21st century, an effort has been made by IFLA to produce a new statement of principles. . . . The first principle is to serve the convenience of catalogue users.”² This paper is also an international call to action by library governing bodies to study and act upon recommendations suggested by the profession for the past forty. The following narrative defines the problem and describes a resolution.

Background

According to its *Classification and Shelving Manual (CSM)*, the Library of Congress (LC) classifies individual literary authors first by language, with subsequent arrangement by the author’s national origin and the timeframe in which the author was prolific (see rule F632).³ The rule provides the option for a cataloger to classify an author by country first where LC has made accommodation for a range of numbers representing geography within that area of classification by language. LC recognizes that this becomes problematic when “literatures . . . have no geographic development [and] may be only partially expanded (such as the literature of former colonies).”⁴

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The CSM also instructs catalogers to use previously established numbers for authors, resulting in items shelved in physical locations that LC or a Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO) library has predetermined. For authors who write in multiple languages, the cataloger must establish a classification number for the author in each language and should “not attempt to keep all the works of the author together.”⁵ Although these instructions make sense to a cataloger within the confines of an overall classification system, and the items can be found easily by call number when the author or title is known, the practical result of these instructions is a physical scattering of authors and literatures. This “scatter effect” thwarts browsing and discovery of common literatures by library patrons who are unaware of the system’s idiosyncrasies or do not know an author or title for which to search. Thomas Mann concludes from his experience as a reference librarian at the Library of Congress and his analysis of recent academic library user surveys that

the majority of faculty and students recognize from their own direct experience . . . that focused *depth searching* of the contents of most of the copyrighted books on a particular topic cannot be realistically done in any way other than the systematic browsing of subject-classified bookstacks . . . and . . . serendipitous discovery by *recognition-browsing* within carefully defined segments of library book collections is crucial to many research projects because it enables researchers to find relevant sources whose keywords they cannot specify in advance . . . ⁶ [emphasis by Mann]

The inadequacies of LCC’s by language model become apparent when we look at African authors and literatures. The infamous 1914 publication of a map of Africa (see figure 1) illustrates how various European countries agreed to divide Africa after multiple attempts to colonize the continent.⁷ Long after each African country established its independence in the 1950s and 60s, those geographical and linguistic divisions are still being used by libraries to determine the location of African literature in their collection. Libraries classify African literature based on which European country colonized a particular country and imposed a foreign language upon the colonized: (e.g., PQ if colonized by the French, PR if colonized by the English, PT if colonized by the Dutch, etc.). The result is that African literature is scattered throughout the P Classification. The scatter effect creates a dilemma for browsers. Users cannot expect to browse one section of the P Classification Scheme to find literature from Africa as he would expect to browse the PR section for English authors or the PQ section for French authors. This scatter effect also presents a false



Figure 1. Partition of Africa, 1914

picture of the literary efforts of African writers by giving the impression that no legitimate literature comes from Africa unless it is under the auspices of a European nation and in the language of the colonizer. The classification rules dictate to library catalogers that the 1914 map referenced above is still legitimate; however, the practice of basing classification decisions on a century-old political map stifles inquiry in a manner that is embarrassing to the profession.

Historical Attempts to Reclassify African Literary Authors

Research literature as early as 1973 indicates that several attempts have been made by catalogers to bring attention to classification issues regarding African literary authors. Mowery in *The Classification of African Literature by the Library of Congress* is one of the first to openly acknowledge that unlike other countries, literature from African countries is scattered throughout the P classification scheme.⁸ He describes the three different patterns to this scattering which further contributes to the inconsistency in the treatment of African literature. Asanga’s critical review of Soyinka’s *Myth, Literature and the African World* carefully summarizes the prevailing attitudes of universities regarding the naming and classification of African literature.⁹ Soyinka’s work argues against the emphasis placed by Europeans on language as the most important criteria for classifying literature and advocates, instead, that “culture” be the more important determinant.¹⁰

Amaeshi proposed adding a new subclass to the P Classification Scheme (i.e., PV), which would include all African literature (general literature, African literature in European languages and African literature in native languages).¹¹ Iwuji addressed the frustrations surrounding the entire LCC scheme for African subjects (religion, history, ethnography, social science and government) including language and literature; he observed that it would take a radical effort to correct the injustices to African literature, and he reintroduced the idea of a new addition to the P Classification Scheme (i.e., PU).¹² He credited an earlier library researcher (Nwamefor) for this idea and also agreed with its unavoidable sub-arrangement: African literature in the native languages of Africa (the PL section of today's LC classification) and African literature in foreign languages ("to be sub-arranged alphabetically by country").¹³

Aderibigbe and Udoh point to the inadequacies of LC's current PL subclassification for African languages and their literatures.¹⁴ All native African languages and their literatures are crowded into the very narrow PL8000–8844 section of the scheme: "A continent larger than China, Europe and the United States together . . . [with] fifty-three countries, a billion people and over a thousand ethnic groups" is lumped together into a tiny subclass.¹⁵ The authors demonstrate that this is not the case for European countries (using French literature as a specific example). They also warn of the consequences of not reclassifying African languages and literature (specifically, individual libraries devising schemes of their own so that their collections make sense to their users). Like Amaeshi and Iwuji, they propose that a new subclass be assigned (i.e., PI or PO).

The classification and cataloging of all things Africana is part of the larger treatment of a special theme issue of *Cataloguing & Classification Quarterly* (2002). This multipart issue looks at individual countries and regions, and devotes an article to the entire continent of Africa and the unique challenges catalogers face. Mutula and Tsvakai, who believe in one unified international classification scheme, call for African catalogers and librarians to create their own standards and tools rather than rely on or wait for the West, and "to solve this problem at the continent level through participatory action before it can be taken to the international level."¹⁶

Similarly, another author calls for African libraries to act first in resolving the classification problem and only then take it to the international scene. Ndakatsu proposes that since the profession has already been made aware of the problem, that a continental [African] bureau be established to liaise with such organizations as IFLA and LC so that African proposals and viable solutions are created for a system in which Africa would not "move itself away from the mainstream of world librarianship."¹⁷ Once again, the need for a unified international classification scheme is emphasized.

While each of the authors above cites slightly different proposals for resolving the problem of classifying African literature, they all agree that the need for a responsible library body to act is urgent. There is also a general consensus that it is not just an "African problem," but an international one. The inescapable conclusion to draw is that the proliferation of literature from the continent and an international need for consistent application of library standards and policies justifies change at a global level.

It will take an organization with the political and financial resources of IFLA to initiate a final resolution to this classification problem. The issue has been well-defined by the profession for over forty years but no leadership has emerged at the top-most level to resolve it. This leaves libraries no choice except to make their own local arrangements. Aderibigbe and Udo have indicated that while this is not the best of solutions, doing nothing is much worse for library users.¹⁸

Inconsistent Application of Rules by LC

In some cases, the rules related to classification by language of a literary author outlined in the *Classification and Shelflisting Manual* are inconsistently applied. For example, Wiesel, author of *Night*, first wrote and published his Holocaust memoirs in Yiddish.¹⁹ The manuscript was not translated into French until two years after its initial publication; yet, it is classified in the French literature subclass of PQ (specifically, PQ2683.I32) because he was living in France when the manuscript was translated into French. The language-before-country rule appears to be ignored in this case. Ironically, Yiddish is an "Oriental" language whose literature would be found in the PJ section—specifically PJ5191-5192 and by author at PJ5129.A-Z, even when it is translated into other languages.²⁰ Alternatively, PJ5120.7.H64 is for Yiddish literature about the Holocaust. Perhaps the first copy of Weisel's work received by LC was the French translation, and would explain this choice of call number. Nevertheless, decisions such as classifying Weisel's work as French rather than Yiddish gives the impression that our cataloging decisions are still embedded in a biased framework that gives preference to Western European languages.

A further example that LCC is not consistently applied is in the classification of Egyptian literature. Egypt is in Africa, yet the classification of Egyptian literary authors (i.e., African literary authors) does not follow the rule of language of the colonizer as is the case for all of the rest of Africa (Ethiopia and Liberia are the only African countries not colonized by Europeans). Instead, Egyptian literary authors are classed under PJ ("Oriental languages and literature") along with languages such as Hebrew (i.e., Yiddish) and Arabic. These inconsistencies demonstrate a need for the

profession to discontinue Eurocentric practices in the classification of non-European literature. Until this is done, it will be impossible for the international community of libraries and librarians to create a consistent system of classifying world literature.

African Book Production and Literary Output

When contemplating a reclassification project or the redesign of a classification schedule, a library should consider the size of the collection that will be impacted, its past and potential rates of growth, and usage or circulation statistics. Before the reclassification project described in this paper, the authors investigated the rate at which African literature might be added to the collection by studying publication statistics. Several reliable sources point to the stagnant statistics regarding the exportation of fiction and nonfiction from the African continent.²¹ The data are primarily reported as “rate of production,” meaning that it is comparative data. However, when examining raw data reported by individual African countries across successive years, there is indeed an increase in the number of volumes of fiction and nonfiction being exported from the country.²² Despite the inconsistency in which countries reported such data—Zell describes it as “bewildering”—there is enough data for Zell to question the stagnant rates of production which he sees cited (i.e., “between 2–3% of the world’s publishing output”) for the past two or more decades.²³

From the earliest years of publishing international surveys, UNESCO acknowledged the difficulty in defining its Literature category; while countries employ different definitions of what constitutes Literature, a “common denominator however appears to be the *creative aspect*” which is attached to this class.²⁴ In the interest of clarity and for the purposes of this paper, the Literature category is for fiction titles (novels, plays, poems, etc.). There was a steady increase in total African book production from 1955 to 1969 with the last three years showing 2,347 total titles in the category of Literature. Twenty-nine years later, a total of 12,416 titles came from reporting African countries in this same category.²⁵ While the comparative data (rate of production) gives the impression that little is changing or happening in the area of literary output from the continent, the actual numbers have been on the rise. Additionally, there is evidence that the continent has the ability to produce even more literature: in 2008 there were 116 independent African publishing houses from nineteen different countries using the distribution house African Books Collective.²⁶ By 2015, there were 149 independent publishers from twenty-four different countries using that same distributor.²⁷ Twenty-nine of the approximately 150 new titles distributed by African Books Collective in 2015 were fiction titles, an increase

from twenty-five in 2014.²⁸ This data certainly demonstrates an increase in the available African literature for purchase by libraries worldwide, yet the numbers are still manageable without a complete redesign of the LC literature classification schedules.

Libraries Can Respond to the Classification Challenge

The following recommendation will work for academic libraries with collections of fewer than 100,000 items that use LCC to shelve and arrange their collection. Small collections (even if adjusted for potential growth in an e-book era) can accommodate African literature under a small range of classification numbers. Rather than see the creation of a new subclass of the P scheme as proposed by others, we propose that a subclass already being used for African literature be further explored, namely PL8000—PL8844.²⁹

Despite inadequacies with the PL8000—PL8844 subclass, it is the most viable solution for a small collection.³⁰ It is the only subclass that specifically addresses literature from the African continent, without quantifying the literature as *other* or *outside*. While the subclass has not been well developed for expansion like the other P subclasses, and is largely intended for literature written in native African languages, the micro-range of PL8010—PL8014.A-Z can accommodate collections of African literature and individual African literary authors. This is possible because the PL8010—PL8013 section is for history and criticism of various works, forms, collections, and translations; whereas the PL8014.A-Z section is arranged by country or region and can be used to refine classification of individual authors. The popular practice has been to use this entire micro-range for collections of African literature.³¹ For example, titles such as *Twelve African Writers* by Moore, *Drama for a New South Africa: Seven Plays* by Graver, and *Art, Ideology, and Social Commitment in African Poetry: A Discourse* by Udentia can all be found in OCLC Worldcat and LC’s catalog classed in this area.

The proposal outlined here is to use the micro-range of PL8010—PL8014.A-Z to relocate African literature to a single subclass (e.g., PL classification), since it has become an effective practice at Midlands Technical College’s library.³² The geographic emphasis of a portion of this range prescribes that in the reclassified scheme, literary authors from a specific country or region have the same first cutter number. For example, all Nigerian literary authors would have a call number that begins with PL8014.N6; all South African literary authors would have a call number that begins with PL8014.S6.

The major dilemma for using the PL8010—PL8014 range occurs when applying the standard practice of using

a maximum of two cutter numbers in a call number—in this case, the first cutter for the country or region and the second for the author. To reflect a specific title, literary criticism, or biography, a third cutter is required. Otherwise, it is not possible to accommodate a range of call numbers a collection needs for literary authors. The aforementioned library is handling this situation as described below, and an appendix illustrating reclassification is included at the end of this paper.

The reclassification process starts with PL8010—PL8010.6, which covers *History and Criticism* for general works, collective biographies, and special forms of literature such as poetry, drama, and fiction. The PL8011 section remains reserved for *Collections of Works*, such as anthologies, and PL8013 remains for *Translations*. The standard two-cutter system works fine for works appropriate for the PL8010—PL8013 range and inherently includes criticism of collections of works.

The three-cutter reclassification begins at PL8014.A-Z. Works by an author are the first to appear in the shelflist. The first cutter reflects the African country or region with which the author is most often associated. For example, works by Nigerian authors will begin with PL8014.N6, and works by South African authors will begin with PL8014.S6. The second cutter reflects the specific author; for instance, works by the Nigerian author, Achebe, will begin at PL8014.N6 A3, and works by South Africa's Gordimer will begin at PL8014.S6 G67. A third cutter is then added for the title of the work, resulting in the call number PL8014.N6 A3 T51958 for Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and PL8014.S6 P38 C791948 for South African Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

Literary criticism and biography follow works by the author using a Z cutter. Biographies are assigned Z46, and critical works are assigned a cutter in the range Z5-Z999, based on the title of the work treated by the criticism. Thus, a 2001 biography of Achebe would be assigned PL8014.N6 A3 Z462001, while a 1990 volume of literary criticism about his novel *Things Fall Apart* would be assigned PL8014.N6 A3 Z8841990. The usual practice of adding numbers to any cutter to distinguish one title from another and maintain logical shelflist order would be necessary. While this reclassification disrupts the standard practice of using two cutters, there are precedents in LCC for a three-cutter system, such as the classification schedules for Music (M), Agriculture (S), and cartographic materials (G). Furthermore, academic libraries such as Yale University Library and Penn State University Libraries have established policies for the use of a third cutter when “deemed necessary.”³³

The authors recognize that the solution described above may not resolve the problem for libraries with very large special collections, such as Yale's or LC's Africana collections, and adopting this reclassification scheme might

be impractical for libraries with collections greater than 100,000 volumes; however, it is worthwhile for a library to examine the number of items that would be affected by a reclassification project and the projected rate of collection growth given the institution's level of support for the study of African literature. The suggested range of numbers and use of a third cutter number is useful for general academic collections, but is simply not as well-developed or nuanced to accommodate comprehensive special collections. Not only is the scatter effect more troublesome, but the issue of where and how to classify works by multilingual authors becomes more complicated.

For example, South African writer Andre' Brink writes in multiple languages. Brink's works are found in the PR subclass when he writes in English and in the PT subclass when he writes in Afrikaans. The small classification range of the PL subclass and its alphabetic arrangement precludes use by larger collections of African literature because they would quickly “run out” of call numbers. Additionally, their ability to cutter for biographies and literary criticism may be far more compromised. It may be worth considering a change in how libraries currently classify authors who write in multiple languages. Rather than scatter the author's work, the cataloger could re-classify all works by an author under one class so that the reader can find all works by and about that author in one physical space. For clarity, the cataloger would then make reference to the language in which the author is writing within the MARC record itself via a 650 field or a 500 notes field; perhaps the adoption of BIBFRAME as a MARC replacement will leverage linked data to provide this type of reference material associated with multilingual authors.

Conclusion

The origin of the reclassification process described above began after one of the authors of this paper (Green) encountered a student struggling to locate materials to support a project for her African literature course. As a cataloger who also spends time helping patrons at the reference desk, she saw firsthand the unintended negative consequences of unquestioned classification practice on access services. We argue that the core competencies of the professional librarian include the ability to recognize the *blurred* demarcation between technical and public services, to leverage the discourse between often-underserved library user and librarian to inform decision making, and to make logical adaptations in local practice that improve user access to materials and services.³⁴

A reconsideration of these classification practices has resulted in two primary benefits. First, this improved shelving practice facilitates browsing and serendipitous discovery

by library users interested in African literature and criticism. When helping patrons who are unsure about a specific author or title of interest, public service librarians can easily direct them to a manageable call number range where they can peruse their options, find literary collections, and discover new authors. Shelving African literary authors together in closer proximity helps library staff meet the needs of student researchers who are just beginning their study of African literature in special topics courses or independent research. Second, further exploration into the rationale behind the classification schedule has inspired us to remind the field about the crucial, but unresolved, work begun over a decade ago about the worldview underlying the P schedules. The authors cited throughout this paper advocate for an international solution to the long-term dilemma of classifying the writings of African literary authors. They would agree to consistency in applying our professional skills. While the standard practice has been to continue as we always have, the “we’ve always done it that way” mentality conveys a negative connotation. Society has found it useful to challenge standard practices that discriminate. It is just as useful to challenge standard practices that are inherently inconsistent at best and illogical at worst. The library profession’s classification system may not be a perfect tool but there are workable solutions to address and improve some of its defects, namely for this paper’s purpose, how African literary works are classified. Will it require a lot of work? Yes. But if we continue to delay a solution, it will only perpetuate the problem as more African writers and literature are published.

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Appendix: Excerpt of African Literary Authors Conversion Table (3-Cutter Rule)

This table illustrates a portion of the reclassification document maintained by the cataloging department as a special shelflist for reference.

Title (245)	Author (100)	Original Call # (050)	New Call #	Notes
The companion to African literatures		PR9340.C65 2000	PL8010 .C65 2000	
The Columbia guide to East African literature in English since 1945	Gikandi	PR9340.G55 2007	PL8010 .E2 G55 2007	
Motherlands : Black women's writing from Africa, the Caribbean, and South Asia		PR9340.5.M67 1992	PL8010 .M67 1992	
A dance of masks : Senghor, Achebe, Soyinka	Peters	PR9340.5.P47X 1978	PL8010 .P47 1978	
Cambridge History of South African Literature		PL8014.S6 C36 2011	PL8010 .S6 C36 2011	(Should be PL8010: (Africa> Literature> History and criticism
African Voices		PR9346.S4 1973	PL8011 .A37 1973	
Echoes of the sunbird : an anthology of contemporary African poetry		PR9346.E27 1993	PL8011 .E34 1993	
Granta Book of the African Short Story		PR9348.G72 2011	PL8011 .G72 2011	
The collector of treasures : and other Botswana village tales	Head	PR9369.3 .H4 C6 1992	PL8014 .B67 H43 C65 1992	Botswana
Critical essays on Bessie Head		PR9369.3.H4 Z63 2003	PL8014 .B67 H43 Z567 2003	Botswana
Bessie Head : thunder behind her ears	Eilersen	PR9369.H4 Z64 1996	PL8014.B67 H43 Z585 1996	Botswana
No sweetness here and other stories	Aidoo	PR9379.9.A35 N6 1970	PL8014.G4 A33 N6 1970	Ghana
The art of Ama Ata Aidoo	Odamtten	PR9379.9.A35 Z8 1994	PL8014.G4 A33 Z783 1994	Ghana
Weep not, child	Ng g	PR9381.9.N45 W44 1964	PL8014.K4 N48 W44 1964	Kenya
Napolo and the python : selected poetry	Chimombo	PR9385.9.C448 N37 1994	PL8014.M32 C455 N37 1994	Malawi
Anthills of the savannah	Achebe	PR9387.9. A3 A83 1987	PL8014.N6 A3 A5 1987	Nigeria
Collected poems	Achebe	PR9387.9.A3 A17 2004	PL8014.N6 A3 C6 2004	Nigeria
Girls at war and other stories	Achebe	PR9387.9. A3 G57 1991	PL8014.N6 A3 G5 1991	Nigeria
No longer at ease	Achebe	PR9387.9. A3 N6 1994	PL8014.N6 A3 N6 1994	Nigeria
Things Fall Apart	Achebe	PR9387.9.A3 1986	PL8014.N6 A3 T5 1986	Nigeria
The Chinua Achebe encyclopedia		PR9387.9.A3 Z459 2003	PL8014.N6 A3 Z459 2003	Nigeria
Chinua Achebe : a biography	Ezemwa-Ohaeto	PR9387.9.A3 Z66 1997	PL8014.N6 A3 Z46 1997	Nigeria
Home and exile	Achebe	PR9387.9.A3 Z467 2000	PL8014.N6 A3 Z46 2000	Nigeria
Chinua Achebe : a celebration		PR9387.9.A3 Z88 1991	PL8014.N6 A3 Z564 1991	Nigeria
So Long a Letter	Ba, Mariama	PQ3989.2.B23 S513 1981	PL8014.S46 B3 S65 1989	Sengal
Ah, But Your land is Beautiful	Paton	PR9369.3.P37 A73 1983	PL8014.S6 P38 A33 1983	South Africa
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