

In Quest of a List of Malaysian Subject Headings

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Abstrak: Katalog perkara merupakan salah satu saluran utama untuk mendapatkan bahan-bahan yang diperlukan oleh pengguna-pengguna perpustakaan. Walaupun Library of Congress Subject Headings merupakan rujukan sejagat, di dalam konteks tempatan, para pustakawan hendaklah memberanikan diri untuk mencipta dan menggunakan tajuk-tajuk perkara yang menggambarkan atau menghuraikan perkara-perkara tempatan berdasarkan maklumat yang kian bertambah melalui penyelidikan dan penerbitan di Malaysia.

Abstract: The subject catalogue is a major source of information for materials required by library users. Although the Library of Congress Subject Headings is a universal reference tool, in the local context, librarians should be bold enough to create and use subject headings which reflect or describe local subjects based upon information which is increasingly becoming available through research and publication in Malaysia.

Information seems to have no limits, but access thereto and transformation as useful knowledge rests on proper bibliographic organization for effective retrieval. Bibliographical control extends to libraries the power to harness and disseminate information, be it descriptive or exploitive. Exploitive power is the ultimate goal. But to achieve this objective the descriptive aspect must be so geared as to provide documentary relevance to users in need of them. In short, accuracy in cataloguing (*encoding*) of recorded knowledge has great bearing on its retrieval (*decoding*) by information seekers.

Bibliographic data embodied in library catalogues is the key which unlocks information in literary resources. The standard catalogue works well enough when the author or title is known. It is less efficient for retrieving materials by subject since adherence to a prescribed list of subject headings limits applicable subject tracings to a few broad terms. This article explores the lack of precision or the total absence of terms in the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), currently used by the University of Malaya Library, for the provision of subject access to certain unique Malaysian topics. In addition it highlights some archaic terminologies in LCSH considered incomprehensible to the average local library user.

To circumvent this shortfall, some subject headings coined by U.M. cataloguers at the dictate of literary warrant are discussed, together with the need for adoption of more sought terms in place of the archaic ones. The thrust of the article is to urge the compilation of uniform subject headings for distinct local topics to be applied in conjunction with LCSH.

Limitations of LCSH

Undoubtedly the Library of Congress has produced the most comprehensive list of subject headings in the English language, but it is in essence the reflection of the literature in that library. It was never intended to be an all-purpose list to be treated as a standard. This was propounded as far back as the 1930's by David J. Haykin¹, the first chief of the Subject Cataloging Division of the Library of Congress. At an A.L.A. Conference in 1936, in a paper read before the Large Libraries Round Table of the Catalog Section, he firmly stated:

Strictly speaking however, the Library of Congress carries on its cataloging for its own use. Since it prints its catalog cards, it is able and willing to offer to other libraries the product of its catalo-

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ging. It is under no obligation however, to satisfy the cataloging needs of other libraries beyond this.

Despite this early pronouncement, LCSH continues to this day to be adopted as the basic standard English language subject headings list by most academic libraries. "If LCSH is a 'standard' it is because librarians have made it so through unlimited application in large numbers of libraries regardless of their purpose, size, type, cultural background or subject orientation In deciding to use LCSH as a multi-purpose tool librarians have opted for something less than a perfect world for subject catalogue retrieval."²

The Library of Congress has never claimed to be able to meet all unique needs. As such, to complain that the LCSH is inadequate for precise subject analysis is less than fair. The onus clearly rests on Malaysian librarians to put on their thinking caps and come up with their own supplementary list of subject headings which truly falls within the ambit of its definition as "an access point to a bibliographic record consisting of a word or phrase which designates the subject of the work(s) contained in the bibliographic item."³

Curiously, librarians in the English speaking countries of Canada and Australia whose cultural background and subject orientation are certainly much akin to that of America have taken the lead in compiling subject terms to cater to their local needs. The Canadian compilation issued as early as 1968 by the Canadian Library Association⁴ has since been given national recognition vide a second edition published in 1985 by the Canadian National Library.⁵ Australia's effort, *List of Australian Subject Headings* (LASH)⁶, was the brainchild of the Library Association of Australia. Hence Malaysian librarians need look no further for a precedent to pattern and define the scope of their local needs than to study the preliminary groundwork undertaken by the primary compilers⁷ of the above-mentioned lists.

Prior to such an attempt, terms in the LCSH which are archaic and not acceptable because they conflict with a Malaysian viewpoint or are totally unused in local parlance, plus topics not covered at all, need to be identified.

Archaic and Inappropriate LCSH Terms

Malaysians do not talk about "phonorecords", "railroads" and "longshoremen". These are Americanisms. So is the subject heading "peddlers and peddling" for hawkers. In local parlance peddlers are more likely to be linked to cyclists! Another curiosity is the non-existence of the subject term bullock carts which has to be subject accessed vide a wider "carts and carriages" heading. Yet the term "bullockies" is listed to mean bullock drivers whilst "bullocks" themselves are entered under "oxen". If cataloguers find this flabbergasting, it is bound to floor Malaysian library patrons.

A very vital area of sociological concern is the ethnic groups in Malaysia and literary output on this topic is prolific. LCSH prescribe entry of the ethnic group qualified by place, thus: "Chinese - Malaysia". Yet for minority groups in America, e.g. Portuguese, the prescribed term is "Portuguese Americans" whilst "Portuguese - America" is used only for those temporarily residing in the land. In line with the foregoing "Malaysian Chinese" would be apt to convey the essence of citizenship and origin of the Chinese who have adopted Malaysia as their homeland.

In dealing with Indians in Malaysia a more hilarious situation prevails. LCSH, not surprisingly treats "Indians" to cover the Red Indians of North America. The scope note under "Indians" reads:

Here are entered works on the aboriginal peoples of the Western Hemisphere, including Eskimos. Works on the inhabitants of India in general are entered under East Indians.

Hence Indians in Malaysia would, following the above directive, have to be subject catalogued as "East Indians - Malaysia". Fortunately commonsense has prevailed and current practice is to use the term "Indians - Malaysia" although "Malaysian Indians" would be more accurate.

The aboriginal groups are most confusingly dealt with in the selected tribal names, spellings and qualifiers which run the gamut of "Malayan people" and "Bornean people" to the all encom-

passing "Malaysian people". At times LCSH has to be overridden, when for example literary warrant demands the use of "Temiar" in place of the recommended "Senoi". Admittedly the ethnocentric nature of the topic places the ball well and truly in the local cataloguers' courts to arrive at uniform headings and preferred Malaysian spellings for all local aboriginal groups, perhaps using the census reports as a guide.

Total incompatibility is experienced for Islamic topics on which literature is burgeoning. The provision in LCSH that for "Ablutions (Judaism)" use "Baptism, Judaism, Hinduism etc." makes it absolutely unacceptable conceptually for this topic in the Islamic context. "Ablutions (Islam)" has therefore been coined as a sought term for local usage. Another very Islamic topic "wakaf" which in LCSH (spelling it as "waqf") is slotted under the very western concept of "Charitable uses, trusts and foundations" has also been cast aside in preference for "wakaf". Again, "Prayer, Times of (Islam)" has been created in view of several studies on the times of the obligatory daily prayers.

In seeking a suitable subject tracing for "*bunga mas*" the very archaic term "Tributary system (China)" emerged. One can easily envisage the total submergence of this topic to information seekers if this term is employed as the applicable subject heading.

Terms Unavailable in LCSH

Just as one cannot always be all things to all men, LCSH for all its efforts to be comprehensive, fails to cater to many concepts woven into Malaysian literary works. This vacuum is most felt in the legal field.

In land law the important statutory designation of certain areas as Malay reservations so as to secure to Malays their exclusive proprietary interests in the land cannot be accommodated under any term in LCSH. The American concept of reservations is the creation of restrictive sanctuaries for the indigenous peoples of that land, the Red Indians. Currently the practice is to subject access this topic under the very general term, "Land tenure - Malaysia". Perhaps the time is ripe

to coin the very obvious term, "Malay reservations".

Still on land law, a practice widely accepted as being an integral part of the early Malay customary transactions in this country was "*jual janji*." Substantial amount of literature is emerging on this topic, first expounded by the distinguished administrator and chronicler, W.E. Maxwell⁸ in his classic treatise "The Law and Customs of the Malays with Reference to Land Tenure". Maxwell wrote:

The Malay who raises money on his holding by the transaction called "*jual janji*" sells his proprietary right for a sum then and there advanced to him and surrenders the land to the vendee... with the condition that if at any time... he shall repay the sum so advanced, he (the vendor) shall be entitled to take back his land. This transaction differs from our mortgage... The profit that the conditional vendor derives from cultivating the land... takes the place of interest, which is not charged, usury being condemned by Muhammedan law.

Since the concept is unknown in any Western legal system, creation of a local heading is imperative, preferably adopting the Malay terminology "*jual janji*".

Customary Malay conventions termed "*adat perpatih*" and "*adat raja-raja Melayu*" have also no parallel concepts in LCSH. Even "*nobat*", although it could well be subject accessed under the LCSH "Coronation music", the local preference is to use the more specific term of "*nobat*" itself.

In the fine arts and music the need for local subject terms is limitless as the cultural traits of the Malaysians evolve. Traditional games like top spinning, kite flying and "*congkak*" need to be accommodated in our subject retrieval tools.

The field is wide open but subject headings selected must be consistent for cataloguing purposes, exchange of information and storage in data-banks.

Conclusion

The urgent need for collective action by local cataloguers to compile a list of Malaysian subject headings is most apparent. However, strict control must be exercised in coining terms to ensure clarity, uniformity and specificity with the adoption of practical and natural entries in place of conventional forms. Random coining in a field already inundated with terminology is courting disaster. One does not attempt to contain a flood by throwing down sand without first putting it into bags. If librarians fail to rise to the challenge in time the bullockies and peddlers are surely going to railroad local topics into bibliographic reservations from which no amount of tributary system (China) will redeem them.

References:

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