

The Yoruba Collection
William and Berta Bascom - From The Bancroft Library
 University of California, Berkeley
 On Microfiche

In many ways a “scholar’s scholar,” William Bascom made important and lasting contributions as an art collector, museum director, folklorist, ethnographer, theoretician and teacher. Bascom’s authority derived from his wide reading, prodigious memory and legendary thoroughness, and his lifelong specialization on the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria. Bascom’s major works covered his beloved Yoruba – that voluble and creative ethnic group now numbers more than 17 million people within Nigeria, as well as their New World descendants in Brazil, Cuba and the United States. Yorubas also live today in Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire and Benin.

After learning their difficult tonal language during his first field trip in 1937-38, Bascom soon displayed distinctive tact and perceptiveness. This gifted fieldworker established a deep and lasting rapport with Yoruba of all classes and regions. As his knowledge of Yoruba increased, so did his appreciation and enthusiasm for all aspects of their culture. He quickly developed a sense of mission to serve as its interpreter. Bascom perhaps did more than any other to make the treasures of Yoruba art, Folklore and ethnography accessible to non-Africans.

Bascom studied nearly every aspect of Yoruba life during his 4+ decades of research. However, he never synthesized or simplified the extreme complexity of Yoruba culture, even in the popular short paperback he designed for classroom use. In other works, he analyzed Yoruba social organization, urbanization, innovation, culture change, technology and material culture, and he made major contributions in art and folklore. His papers on Yoruba religion, mythical, folkloric and dietary continuities in Cuba, the Sea Islands and elsewhere in the New World have become classics.

Of all African peoples, the Yoruba have perhaps attracted the most enlightened scholars in recent years. Following Bascom’s pattern, many researchers have learned the Yoruba language, resulting in a vast increase in sensitivity and comprehension. Today, no African culture is better known, understood or appreciated in this country. There will always be a place for the sympathetic observer, the dedicated reader, the perceptive and fair-minded analyst—and William Bascom will long remain the model of the ultimate field anthropologist. However, in recent years since Nigeria’s independence in 1960, many Yoruba have become distinguished scholars, producing a number of important works. At present, Wole Soyinka, the first African to win the Nobel Prize, is the most celebrated of those writing in the Yoruba language.

Bascom was born in Illinois in 1912 and was raised in Madison, Wisconsin. He earned a B.A. in Physics in 1933 and, in 1936, an M.A. in Anthropology. In 1939 he completed his Ph.D. in Anthropology at Northwestern, where he was the first doctoral student of the legendary Melville Herskovits. He was a member of the faculty at Northwestern until

1957. He then moved to the University of California, Berkeley, where he taught until his retirement in 1979, serving concurrently as Director of the Lowie Museum of Anthropology. Bascom served as President of the American Folklore Society from 1952 to 1954, and as President of the Fellows of the American Folklore Society from 1969 to 1970. In 1979 he was elected to and Honorary Fellowship of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. He died in 1981, leaving behind a rich legacy of scholarly achievement in African art and folklore.

The Bascom Collection is the result of this great scholar's work, beginning in 1937 and continuing throughout his life. In fact, Yoruba art was among the first African art brought to the attention of the western world. In April 1939 Bascom wrote about the famous Ife heads in "The Legacy of an Unknown Nigerian 'Donatello'," in *The Illustrated London News*. Bascom saved these heads from obscurity and purchased two for himself, even though he was a graduate student at the time and did not have much money. Years later he donated them to the Museum of Ife Antiquities, built to preserve Nigerian art. Bascom collected a wide range of pieces, many of which are now housed in the Lowie Museum, the American Museum of Natural History and elsewhere.

THE COLLECTION

When one asked about his collection, Bascom replied, "I started out collecting exclusively Yoruba art ... During World War II, I had the opportunity to travel widely in Western Africa and began to collect other works of art. I was such a purist in the beginning that I would not buy from a dealer. However, I soon became interested in styles I could not acquire otherwise, and eventually began to buy from dealers."

Bascom's Yoruba collection was begun when he first went to Africa 1937. Initially he found substantial information in the school readers that had been published in those days. The number of volumes steadily increased, especially after 1945. In subsequent years, he kept adding to the collection, acquiring rare books from African sections of bookstores, antique shops and even private libraries. The end product—nearly 450 volumes—is the result of 48 years of collecting, including more than five years living among the Yoruba.

The collection dates from 1841 to 1973, including 16 titles from the 19th century. For the period 1900-1918, there is approximately one title per year. Each subsequent decade reflects an increasing number of titles, peaking in the 1940s. By the 1970s, Bascom had essentially ceased collecting; therefore, only three volumes represent that decade. In 1983, Dr. Berta Montero Bascom presented the collection to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley in memory of her husband. The collection may be consulted at The Bancroft Library. In addition, the University's Main Library regularly adds contemporary Yoruba publications to its holdings in order to facilitate the study of this unique material.

The Yoruba language, a tonal language is a dominant member of the Kwa subgroup of the Niger-Congo group of languages. It is exceedingly complex, with at least 57 different tense forms. Works on the language itself number approximately 110 titles including alphabets, books on numerals, grammars, dictionaries, phrase books and 64 readers. The collection also features four biographies in Yoruba, including one on Bishop Samuel Crowther, who produced the first dictionary and the first Yoruba translation of the Bible.

The collection also includes novels, literary criticism, two volumes of translation from Shakespeare, poetry, 23 hymnals, 36 works on religion, 40 works of devotional literature and 22 titles that focus on the Bible. More than 30 volumes are folkloric in nature, including riddles, fables, proverbs and nursery rhymes. There are also histories of Nigerian towns, as well as studies on health, travel, marriage and agriculture.

How do we account for the uniqueness of this collection? In the 1930s and '40s the Bascoms were nearly alone in their collecting of these materials. A similar collection at the British Museums was partially destroyed by fire in 1946, and within Nigeria few attempts were made to create such libraries. The Biafran War, the weather, poor paper, short print runs and other conditions all served to reduce the number of extant copies of early works in the country itself.

Here, in this extraordinary library, and in this microfiche edition, one finds the essence of Yoruba civilization—one of the most important people south of the Sahara, highly regarded for their government, art, religion and long traditions that have contributed to the cultures of the entire world

[BASED ON AN UNPUBLISHED BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH BY DANIEL J. CROWLEY, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS; A STATEMENT BY BASCOM'S WIDOW, DR. BERTA MONTERO BASCOM, IN 1988 IN CONJUNCTION WITH AN EXHIBIT OF AFRICAN FROM THE WILLIAM AND BERTA BASCOM COLLECTION; SIMON OTTENBERG'S CHAPTER, "THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF WILLIAM R. BASCOM," IN *AFRICAN RELIGIOUS GROUPS AND BELIEFS: PAPERS IN HONOR OF WILLIAM R. BASCOM*, (MEERUT, INDIA: FOLKLORE INSTITUTE, 1982); AND ADDITIONAL NOTES BY MRS. BASCOM AND PHYLLIS BISCHOF, LIBRARIAN FOR AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLECTIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY.]

THE MICROFICHE

Bascom's Yoruba collection is a treasure trove of rare books describing and preserving the culture and early 20th-century history of the Yoruba people. Many of the books were originally quite common. At present, however, few copies exist even in Nigeria. Some titles, in fact, are not listed in the National Union Catalog. All those familiar with it agree that this is the richest collection of Yoruba books in the world.

While most of the books were published in Nigeria, many came from England and several other countries. For the most part, the publishers have been quite gracious and generous in granting permission to reproduce their works on fiche. No publisher has actually refused, however a few publishers failed to reply to requests for permission. In such instances, such titles have been included in the microfiche edition. It is presumed that most if not all of these firms are long out of business. The microfiche edition includes virtually every title in Bascom's Yoruba collection.