Maps and Mapmaking in Africa

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With the exception of medieval Islamic mapmaking, the corpus of precolonial African maps is too small for us to generalize about distinctive cartographic traditions. B. F. Adler (1910) provides the only summary of sub-Saharan mapping, and most of his examples are maps solicited from Africans by European explorers. The paucity of extant maps may be explained by a number of factors. First, among literate cultures like the Muslim Hausa and Jula of West Africa, there existed effective substitutes such as travel guides written in Arabic script. These commonly took the form of itineraries that listed the names of towns between a starting point and destination (e.g., the road from Bornu to Mecca). In 1824, Joseph Dupuis provided examples of these “native charts” kept by merchants and pilgrims which he used to construct his own maps of West Africa. Second, the scarcity of maps in nonliterate societies may be explained by a common recourse to drawing maps on the ground. European explorers witnessed this indigenous form of mapmaking and were frequently impressed by its accuracy. However, the ephemeral nature of ground maps has left us with a few traces of this apparently widespread practice (see below).

Third, the demand for maps was probably very limited because of the hazards of traveling beyond one’s territory. Even merchants risked being captured by neighboring groups if they did not travel in caravans, carry letters of introduction, or have contacts in distant communities. Under these circumstances, there was a little demand for maps as conveyors of geographical knowledge to outsiders. Finally, in searching for African maps, we should be wary of looking for Western forms of mapping in societies whose spatial concepts and relationships to land are fundamentally different. Western maps are constructed upon culturally specific notions of property, territory, and political authority over bounded areas. One should not assume a priori that African peoples hold these concepts. Moreover, as Paul Bohannan shows in his discussion of the “genealogical map” of the Tiv of central Nigeria and the “rain shrine neighborhoods” of the Tonga of Zambia, there is tremendous variety within Africa itself in the conceptualization of space. Rarely does one find the expression of socio-spatial relationships in two-dimensional maps. Despite this restricted development of mapmaking in precolonial Africa, there are a number of interesting maps to consider.

One of the earliest examples of African mapmaking is an Egyptian map dating from about 1150 BCE. Fragments of the picture map depicting the Wadi Hammamat area between Thebes and the Red Sea port of Quseir are preserved on papyrus in the Muzeo Egizio at Turin. Other ancient Egyptian examples include plans of gardens and maps of the afterlife painted on stone during the second millennium BCE.

One of the foremost cartographers of the Middle Ages was al-Sharīf al-Idrīsī. He was born in Ceuta, Morocco, in 493 AH/AD 1100 and is believed to have died there in 560/1165. He was the court geographer of the Norman king of Sicily, Roger II, for whom he wrote his celebrated Nuzhat al-mushtāq fī’ khīrāq al-āfāq (The Book of Pleasant Journeys into Faraway Lands, also known as the Book of Roger). This work contains a world map and 70 sectional maps that build upon both the Balkhī and Ptolemaic cartographic traditions. Although written in the twelfth century, al-Idrīsī’s work was still influential five centuries later among North African cartmakers. The portolan charts of the al-Sharaﬁ al-ṣīfiqṣī family that thrived in the Tunisian town of Sfax for over eight generations are compilations based on al-Idrīsī and Catalan sea charts.

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A distinctive form of schematic mapping dating from the eighteenth century is represented in Ethiopian manuscript maps of Tigre (Fig. 1). These maps consist of three concentric circles in which Aksum, the center of Ethiopian Christendom, is situated in a box in the innermost circle, as in the figure here; the outer circles are divided into segments that contain the cardinal directions and the names of outlying districts. At least five versions of this map are known to exist, two of which are found in the manuscript titled Kebrā Nāgāst (The Glory of Kings). Below the circle map is a “wheel of wind” or “wind rose” in which the cardinal directions are again shown with east at the top. More research is needed to examine the relationships between these circle maps and the texts in which they are found.

Evidence of African maps and mapmaking in the nineteenth century is largely found in European accounts of exploration and travel. In many instances, African mapmaking was stimulated by European interest in the geography of unexplored areas. A well-known example is the map drawn by Sultan Bello for Hugh Clapperton during his visit to the Sokoto Caliphate in 1824. Clapperton was particularly interested in the course of the Niger River whose outlet was one of the great geographical mysteries of the day. Sultan Bello drew a map in the sand showing the Niger’s course and later reproduced this map on paper which Clapperton published in the account of his journey. Although dismissed by some Europeans as a “rude representation,” Bello’s map and geographical writings were valued by later explorers like Heinrich Barth in 1859. His map is also of interest because it demonstrates the “rule of ethnocentricity”

Fig. 1 Ethiopian map of Tigre. From the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Collection Antoine d’Abbadie 225 fol. 3 cliché A85/489
common to most mapmaking traditions, in which the territory of a cultural group – in this case the Sokoto Caliphate – is placed in the middle of the map.

There are many other examples of Africans drawing maps on the ground in response to European questions on the geography of a particular region. The explorer Charles Beke was shown the incorrect course of the Gojab River south of Abyssinia by a Muslim merchant named Hâdji Mohammed Nûr who drew its course on the ground with his stick. In 1881, the Bohemian doctor Emile Holub recounts a similar experience when traveling in the mid 1870s in the Marutse Empire of the upper Zambezi River. Before leaving to explore the headwaters of the Zambezi, Holub asked the Maurtse chief, Sepopo, to suggest a good travel route. To Holub’s great interest, Sepopo drew a map in the sand whose accuracy was confirmed by two other persons familiar with the area. While on a frontier reconnaissance mission in the dense tropical forests of southeastern Liberia in 1899, the French explorer Capt. Henri d’Ollone asked a person named Toulou to draw on the ground with a piece of charcoal the distribution of the different ethnic groups in the region. After a moment’s reflection and to d’Ollone’s great surprise, Toolou drew a detailed ground map showing the location of villages, rivers, and mountains, as well as ethnic groups. The information gained from solicited maps was occasionally incorporated into European maps. For example, sections of the map of the Sahara produced by the French geographer Henri Duveyrier in 1864 were based on maps drawn in the sand by “Cheikh-Othman.” The German geographer Karl Weule preserved the maps he solicited by requesting that they be drawn on paper that he provided. Three of these solicited maps are found in Adler’s 1910 book.

Among the Luba of central Africa, ephemeral maps were a common feature of initiation ceremonies. During one stage, the initiate is taken into a meetinghouse where elders have chalked maps on the wall showing major lakes and rivers, the location of various chiefdoms, and the dwelling places of spirits. While facing the map, initiates are quizzed about the residence of certain chiefs and spirits within the Luba kingdom. In the final stage of initiation, elders teach initiates about the origins of Luba kingship and customary taboos. In recounting the origin myths, elders use memory boards (lukasa) as mnemonic devices to aid their storytelling. These small rectangular boards are covered with beads and shells that map the migration history of the founding royal family. Rivers and villages are represented by the patterning of beads and shells into configurations that are recognizable to initiates.

An example of cosmographical mapping is found among the Bakongo of Zaïre in their initiation and funerary art. The Kongo cosmos is pictured ideographically as the sun moving through four phases: dawn, noon, sunset, and midnight. The cosmogram is composed of a cross representing the cardinal directions with a small circle at each end point. The horizontal line (kalunga) divides the realms of the living and the dead through which all persons travel. Only the most courageous and generous in life return as immortal spirits in natural forms and forces in the landscape.

A more secular and ambitious mapmaking took place in the Kingdom of Bamum in contemporary western Cameroun under the leadership of King Njoya. Njoya stands out as a highly creative and politically astute individual who collaborated with a succession of German, British, and French authorities to consolidate his rule. He was responsible for developing an alphabet which enabled him to write the history of his kingdom in his own language. He also appears to have been a self-taught mapmaker whose earliest preserved work (1906) is composed of a plan of his farm and a route map between Fumban, the capital of Bamum, and his fields. Njoya further honed his mapping skills when the German cartographer Moisel visited Bamum in 1908. One of Njoya’s most impressive mapping projects was a topographic survey of his kingdom that employed up to 60 individuals. When the British took control of western Cameroun from the Germans in 1916, Njoya displayed his political skills by presenting a map of his kingdom to the British political officer stationed in Foumban. This map with its southerly orientation shows a well-defined territory in which all roads lead to the royal capital and historic center of political authority (Fig. 2). In his letter to the King of England that accompanies the map, Njoya seeks British
protection against the Germans. In this context, Njoya’s map becomes an instrument of power that legitimates his (contested) claim to be the ruler of Bamum and symbolizes his willingness to collaborate with colonial authorities.

In conclusion, the dearth of African maps seems to imply that mapmaking was not a common means of expressing spatial information. One could even argue that the maps solicited by explorers reflected European mapping traditions rather than African customs. However, the ability of individuals from across the continent to produce consistently accurate ground maps suggests that this was an indigenous practice. Ironically, these ephemeral maps led to the drawing of new and improved maps of Africa by Europeans who ultimately employed them in their partition of the continent into colonies.

See Also

▶ al-Idrīsī
▶ Balkhi School

References


