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Source: *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 1988, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1988), pp. 57-64

Published by: The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/622775>

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Imperialism, colonialism and cartography

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Revised MS received 9 March, 1987

ABSTRACT

The centenary of the Berlin conference of 1884–85 was an opportunity for historians to reiterate the view that the conference was not convened to partition Africa. It follows from the imperial function of the conference that subsequent colonialism was a short-lived aberration in four centuries of a continuing imperial relationship between Europe and Africa. The established attributes which differentiate imperialism from colonialism provide a framework for understanding the cartographic evolution of Africa. The long-standing view of an eighteenth century cartographic reformation of Africa is challenged. Pre-colonial cartography of Africa is, instead, characterized by methodological continuity, which is still evident in the cartography of the nineteenth century European explorers, whereas the major discontinuity coincides with the beginnings of colonial rule. The cartographic requirements for the implementation of colonial rule on the ground are different from those which foster a more remote imperial relationship. The attributes of imperial cartography are now reasserting themselves in the post-colonial period.

KEY WORDS: Africa, Reinterpretation of evidence, Cartography, Imperialism, Colonialism, Exploration

Erroneous interpretations of historical events tend to persist, despite the best efforts of historians to rectify matters. In looking at the origins of colonialism in Africa, cartographic historians as well as historical and political geographers seem unaware of the interpretation which diplomatic historians now place on a famous nineteenth century meeting. The consequence for cartographic historiography is that a significant change in the characteristic content of the evolving cartography of Africa has been overlooked, whilst the nature and origins of an earlier phase of change has been misunderstood. If 'European pre-eminence in cartography and map-making' determined what constitutes Africa, regardless of cultural history (Mazrui, 1986, p. 101), then the continent's cartographic history is no mundane or esoteric subject.

The meeting in question is the fourteen-power Berlin conference on Africa of 1884–85, whose centenary was recently marked by at least six academic conferences. Fierce controversy was aroused by the announcement of some of these events, which were erroneously seen as celebrating the anniversary of the launching of colonial partition (Hargreaves, 1984), but historians of Africa have long been at pains to emphasize that the Berlin Conference did not mark

the beginnings of partition (Crowder, 1968; Fage, 1969; Hargreaves, 1974). The Berlin Conference was convened because collaborative arrangements on which European states had hitherto relied were beginning to break down (Hargreaves, 1985a). Continued commercial access to Africa was the common objective, not control of its territory. What has been described as 'the old system of free trade imperialism in West Africa' was threatened (Hargreaves, 1985b, p. 21). Admittedly, the conference proved ineffective in constraining the champions of partition. The Berlin provisions proved inadequate, as the devices of treaty and protectorate were perforce utilized to obtain control inland, but the recognition of the Berlin conference as a meeting of imperialists not colonialists and the identification of the differing attributes of imperialism and colonialism has significance for our understanding of the cartographic evolution of Africa, which requires reappraisal.

The term 'imperialism' has come to mean the control of the weak by the rich and powerful, not necessarily by means of the exercise of direct authority. It is an appropriate term for the long-standing relationship between Europe and Africa which the Berlin Conference was convened to defend, that is the traditional free-trading system at the coasts of the

continent. The freedom was for Europeans to compete for trade, not for Africans to obstruct it (Hargreaves, 1984) and the imperial relationship was essentially international in character, being based on mutuality of interests among European powers. The European international imperialism which was promoted in Berlin in 1884 is equally evident in the founding of the International African Association at the Brussels Geographical Conference in 1876 (Bridges, 1980) and indeed it is a relationship which can be traced back through at least four centuries. By contrast, the period of direct European colonial rule which began nevertheless in the 1890s and which is differentiated by parochial European nationalism and exclusivity, can be regarded as an abnormal and brief but influential interlude in the imperial relationship between Africa and Europe. The relatively ephemeral nature of colonialism by contrast with imperialism in Africa is emphasized by projecting forward to the post-colonial period, for example to the successive negotiations of the Lome Conventions between the EEC and the largely African ACP states. Only tiny residuals of European colonialism remain in Africa but the very long standing imperial relationship is arguably evolving. European imperialism in Africa is characterized by collaborative internationalism and historical continuity, whereas colonialism was a relatively brief assertion of competitive European nationalism. The difference has great significance in understanding the cartographic evolution of Africa.

Pre-colonial cartography of the interior of Africa has long been seen as dividing into two distinct phases, which are of debatable validity and which obscure the reality of the forces operative. The earlier phase is characterized by its use of Ptolemaic conceptions, particularly for the source of the Nile, and is epitomized by the eight-sheet map of Africa of 1564 by Gastaldi whose subsequent influence is apparent in the depictions of Africa by Ortelius (1570), Speed (1627), Blaeu (1642) and others. Supposedly, the turning point in the cartography of Africa is located in the 'Age of Reason', in the maps of the French school, notably De L'Isle (1700) and d'Anville (1727) (Tooley, 1969). A scientific approach led to the removal of many legends and assumptions by the innovators who achieved marked gains in accuracy and were famous for their blank spaces (Lane-Poole, 1950; Klemp, 1968; Tooley, Bricker and Crone, 1976; Wallis, 1986) which are allegedly indicative of a scientific attitude of mind. But contemporary wisdom about the interior of Africa was set aside in favour of

blank spaces as early as 1666 by Vossius (Randles, 1956), while the Ptolemaic tradition of Africa was itself replete with blank spaces and the use of the word 'incognita'.

Sixteenth and seventeenth century cartography employed such contemporary sources as were available and made significant changes in the depiction of Africa (Ouwinga, 1975) in the same way that James MacQueen (1856) made substantial changes to the map of Central Africa in the nineteenth century, albeit with different subject matter and quality of data. Just as Almeida was critical of previous depictions of Ethiopia in the seventeenth century (Skelton, 1958), so eighteenth century cartographers reacted to the work of their predecessors, given new sources to hand. There is methodological continuity linking eighteenth century and both earlier and later cartographers.

The critical circumstances for methodological continuity in the mapping of Africa over four centuries by cartographers from several European countries was movement of information about Africa within Europe. Certainly, commercial competition meant that the navigational information of the Dutch, for example, remained secret (Ouwinga, 1975). Nevertheless, original information about Africa did disseminate within Europe under the commercial impetus of publication. Perhaps the most striking example, which challenges the conception of the eighteenth century French school as innovatory in its critical attitudes or its sources, and also demonstrates the manner in which information disseminated for commercial gain, is the 1665 Portuguese Atlas of Africa by Joao Teixeira Albernaz II. The atlas was commissioned by a Frenchman and together with other Portuguese source material, it was used to transform previous depictions of the Zambezi basin by Jaillot (1678) a Frenchman, by Berry (1680) an Englishman and by Coronelli (1683) a Venetian, in their maps of Africa, before inspiring De L'Isle and d'Anville (Cortêsão and da Mota, 1960). In the past, the commercial and strategic divisions within Europe have been stressed in seeking to comprehend the evolving early cartography of Africa, but it is the facility with which Portuguese information disseminated throughout Europe in the form of the printed map which is striking. This is understandable, given the essentially collaborative nature of European imperialism towards Africa.

The pre-colonial cartographic depiction of Africa represents evolution not transformation. The concept of an eighteenth century reformation derives from

analysis of form, not process, that is from the external form of the end product, the change of map content, as ethnographic descriptions and perspective drawings of hills were removed and as new information lead to the abandonment of some long-standing delineations of parts of the interior. It is in any case an illusion. Those particular changes in content are not exclusive to the eighteenth century. Furthermore, the manner in which African maps were compiled in the eighteenth century was little altered.

The great cartographic watershed for Africa relates to the replacement of remote imperial influence with direct colonial authority. In cartographic terms, the transition is primarily a twentieth century process which does not properly include the well known maps of the interior of Africa by eighteenth and nineteenth century European explorers. There is little evidence of a direct connection between the explorations of men such as Livingstone, Speke, Grant and Stanley and the initiation of colonialism. Rather, the connection is with the 'unofficial mind' (Bridges, 1982, p. 18) of imperialism which was located in the commercial middle class of British society, in servicemen and officials, businessmen and missionary leaders, and in the membership of the African Association which was founded in 1788 and quickly became involved in the problem of the source, course and termination of the Niger. The maps themselves were based on instrumental observation which added a scientific dimension to the travellers' records, an important 'civilizing' element in legitimizing the European penetration, presence and even interference in Africa in the eyes of the unofficial mind. However, the unofficial scramble for Africa by the commercial and service classes was an imperial manifestation to be differentiated from the subsequent and not unrelated but more direct intervention by European governments.

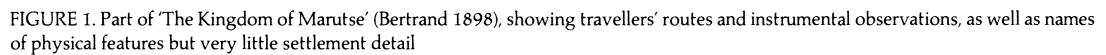
An archetypal example of a traveller in the imperialist mould is Alfred Bertrand, a Swiss army captain who was one of a four-man expedition of exploration to north-west Rhodesia in 1895. Bertrand was to become President of the Geographical Society of Geneva and a Vice-President of the Ninth International Geographical Congress in Geneva. He was a member of ten European geographical societies, mostly honorary, including the Royal Geographical Society (Bertrand, 1926). The account of his travels in north-west Rhodesia was published in French (Bertrand, 1898) and English and includes the map compiled by the Royal Geographical Society in association with the lecture to the Society in 1897 by

the members of the expedition. As a Swiss national, Bertrand could have had little interest in promoting colonialism by his native land. As a result of his visit to the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society station at Sefula during the expedition, he in fact devoted a great deal of time and effort throughout the remaining twenty-seven years of his life to raising financial and moral support throughout Europe for the Barotseland and Basutoland missions. The detailed map of 'The Kingdom of the Marutse' in his book (Fig. 1), with its many scientifically authentic latitudinal observations inscribed on the map and its primary concern with physical features (also mission stations) observed by the travellers, is appropriate to the imperial (as opposed to colonial) interests which Bertrand promoted throughout Europe so philanthropically and vigorously.

The cartographic transition from imperialism to colonialism tends to lag behind the legal transformation. Maps in the imperial mould continued to be published into the colonial period, for example, maps depicting the territory under the administration of the British South Africa Company published by Edward Stanford between 1895 and 1906. Although these were compiled with the assistance of a company who eventually came to govern all of Northern and Southern Rhodesia, their function is primarily the prosecution of commercial activities, as shown by the many descriptive entries on the maps, extolling the farming and ranching potential of various parts of the country.

The great change to maps deriving from the colonial rather than the imperial function is contemporaneous with first efforts to establish administrations on the ground, usually some short time after the formal proclamation by the colonial authority. The maps reflect the needs of the nascent administrative systems, as is exemplified by the first District Officer to be stationed in what was then the Balovale District of northern Rhodesia, who refers to his first long tour, as 'trying to make a census of the people and a map of the country' (Venning, 1955, p. 55). His map has none of the instrumentally-derived precision of the earlier travellers in the region. It is inaccurate (Stone, 1977) and its subject matter is predominantly the location of the local populace. It was a functional administrative tool and an example of a great many colonial district maps (Stone, 1982) which locate rural settlement in unprecedented detail.

The usual reason why professional Colonial Survey Officers frequently did not compile the maps necessary for the imposition of colonial rule was



necessitated a high order of professional expertise, namely cadastral mapping for the purposes of demarcating townships and building plots, roads, railways,

alienated land, reserved land and all of the other boundaries that were a part of colonial imposition. The importance of this second type of colonial map which was a product of the change from imperial to colonial control, is evident from the necessity for Colonial Surveys to resort to unsophisticated compilation techniques in publishing early topographic series (Stone, 1984), sometimes employing the amateur work of the District Officer (Fig. 2). Overall, progress on the provision of large scale topographic map cover in British colonial Africa was slow. The reason why the Federal Surveys of Rhodesia and Nyasaland was able to publish such a large number of large-scale topographic sheets of Northern and Southern Rhodesia during its short life span from 1956 to 1964, was in part the paucity of coverage achieved in the previous half century of colonial rule. However, the association of colonial map making with cadastral surveys at the expense of topographic survey, is nowhere better demonstrated than in South Africa. The method which Potter established in 1657 to record rights in land at the Cape (Fisher, 1984, p. 58) is still in use today, but the country made little progress towards the provision of adequate topographic cover until the reorganization of the Trigonometrical Survey Office in 1936 (Liebenberg, 1979), long after the end of colonial rule.

A further differentiating factor between imperialism and colonialism which is supported by the cartographic evidence, is the removal of the international dimension with the imposition of colonial rule. This is recognized, for example, by McGrath (1976), whose study of British East Africa specifically excludes the German contribution to the mapping of its former territory. The nationalistic parochialism of the colonial period was carried to its ultimate in the decentralized administrative system of former British Africa in which territories were treated as separate and self-contained units (Jeffries, 1956). In consequence, there is great variation between the former British territories as to the amount and type of topographic mapping which was carried out. For example, an early start on topographic survey was made in Uganda by comparison with Northern Rhodesia, although Uganda is renowned for the very early Mailo Survey of Buganda which was an experiment in land settlement and exemplifies the pre-eminence of cadastral work in the colonial period. Each European colonial power went its own way in devising, or not devising, its own programme of surveys and each British territory did likewise.

If colonialism was a relatively brief aberration in

the prolonged and otherwise uninterrupted imperial relationship between Europe and Africa, then sufficient time should have elapsed by now for evidence of the traits of imperialism to be reasserting themselves. Debatably, the evidence is present in the negotiations between the EEC and its African Associates in the context of the Lomé Conventions. Equally contentiously, there is cartographic evidence deriving from the former Directorate of Overseas Surveys (hereafter DOS), a colonial institution in origin, which had assumed the broader role of an agency for technical aid to overseas governments. As McGrath (1983) demonstrates, there is continuity of purpose in the relationship between DOS and firstly the then dependencies of the UK, and eventually the newly independent countries, continuity which was in part a product of the local autonomy of the former dependencies. Nevertheless, the changed nature of the political relationship did bring about change in the cartographic product, not unrelated to the reformation of British aid policy after the creation of a Ministry of Overseas Development in 1964. In the post-independence period, the Directorate has of course been obliged to take account of UK government policy on aid in project selection. It is in this context that changes in product must be seen, as for example, in carrying out cadastral survey (once the hallmark of colonial surveys and now of the surveys of independent governments), most notably in support of the scheme to resettle African small holders on farms purchased from Europeans in the Highlands of Kenya; or in the formation of the Land Resources Division of DOS in 1964 to produce a range of maps related to land use; or the successful 'joint projects' of DOS which were specifically designed as vehicles for technology transfer. Then, the extensive programmes of large scale topographic mapping which were mounted by the Directorate of Commonwealth Surveys (DCS) throughout large parts of former British Africa in the years preceding independence may be seen to have their origins in the gradual reassertion of imperial policy over colonial policy, to meet the needs of post-war Britain for reliable sources of primary products in circumstances of impending political change in Africa. It was this writer's experience that the colonial administrator on the ground had little need of the topographic cover which latterly became available. The significant feature is not that one type of map is always to be associated with colonialism or with imperialism, (since neither function is static), but that change in cartographic usage will occur in the transition from



FIGURE 2. Part of Northern Rhodesia 1:250,000 (Provisional) sheet 5, compiled in the Survey Department, Livingstone in 1928. Settlement is shown in meticulous detail. Named rivers serve as the locational framework and paths are indicated with little attempt at planimetric accuracy, which was not necessary for the map to function as a useful administrative tool. The detail derives from manuscript district maps compiled and built up by successive touring officers, beginning with J. H. Venning in 1907

the one political status to the other by virtue of differing functions.

Latterly, DOS was devoting a decreasing pro-

portion of its effort in Africa to former British territories with programmes of work or training provision for Ethiopia, Liberia, Chad and Madagascar

(Directorate of Overseas Surveys, 1985). Not only was a more internationalist attitude to Africa becoming apparent, but with the responsibilities of the Directorate now transferred to the Ordnance Survey's Overseas Surveys Directorate and with much overseas work to be transferred to the private sector (McGrath, 1982) we may see commercial firms perhaps from several European countries working under Ordnance Survey and Overseas Development Agency supervision, thus restoring the commercial and international dimensions of European cartography in Africa which were associated with seventeenth and eighteenth century imperialism.

Recent writing (e.g., Griffiths, 1986; Eicher, 1986) still does not always accept that the delegates to the Berlin Conference of 1884–85 'were not talking about partitioning Africa' (Hargreaves, 1984, p. 17) and that it was a last-ditch attempt to sustain Europe's traditionally internationalist approach of common access to Africa. Nevertheless, differentiation between the historical continuity of the imperialist mercantile ethic which was still on display in Berlin a century ago and its brief demise in direct colonial rule provides a framework for challenging long-standing interpretations of pre-colonial cartographic evolution and for appreciating the prime characteristics of colonial surveys. It also provides a stimulus to further work on colonial cartography, in the form of a hypothesis which envisages disparate and comparatively uncoordinated activity across seven short-lived spheres of European rule. Although brief, it was an important phase of map making, since it perforce provided the bases for both the cadastral and the topographic surveys of the independent nations of Africa, who are now restored to a more indirect, if not imperial relationship with Europe.

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