

● The World and Africa: Rediscovering African Geographies

.....

‘One always turns back to Winwood Reade’s *The Martyrdom of Man* for renewal of faith’. So wrote W. E. B. Du Bois in the preface to his path-breaking essay on *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part which Africa has played in World History*, published in 1947. It was an unlikely tribute. A few months earlier, George Orwell had reviewed a new edition of *The Martyrdom of Man* (‘that queer, unhonoured masterpiece’), describing it as ‘a kind of vision, or epic,...repudiating almost from its first pages the values of bourgeois society’. While Orwell presented Winwood Reade’s idiosyncratic narrative, originally published in 1872, as a compelling humanist history, Du Bois claimed it as one of the foundations of a genuinely Pan-African historiography. This is all the more remarkable given that Reade’s more obviously Africanist writings – tales of travel and exploration gathered together in *Savage Africa* (1863) and *The African Sketch-Book* (1873) - have often been dismissed as the product of racist Victorian fantasy: the epitome, to quote one account, of *The Africa That Never Was*.¹

What, then, did the African-American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois find in the work of British writer and traveller Winwood Reade? In short, he found Africa as a world-historical subject. Not the Africa of the philosophers, like Hegel, who could not imagine an African history worthy of the name. Nor the Africa of the diplomats and statesmen, for whom the map was always more important than the territory. But the Africa of human history, conceived as a vast pageant on the world stage. Under the heads of War, Religion, Liberty and Intellect, *The Martyrdom of Man* charted an epic in four acts: the rise and fall of the ancient Egyptians, Persians, Greeks and Romans; the origins of Judaism, Christianity and Islam; the history of modern Europe and America, especially in relation to the Enlightenment and anti-slavery; and the prospects for the future of the human race in the light of scientific progress. World history was imagined as a succession of collective migrations, struggles and crises, each folding into the next, and each becoming ever more global. And instead of being at the margins, the peoples of Africa were at the heart of this story, actively making history rather than being left behind by it. ‘I began it’, Reade tells us in the preface, ‘intending to prove that “Negroland” or Inner Africa is not cut off from the main-stream of events, as writers of philosophical history have always maintained, but connected by means of Islam with the lands of the East; and also that it has, by means of the slave-trade, powerfully influenced the moral history of Europe and the political history of the United States. But I was gradually led from writing the history of Africa into writing the history of the world’.²

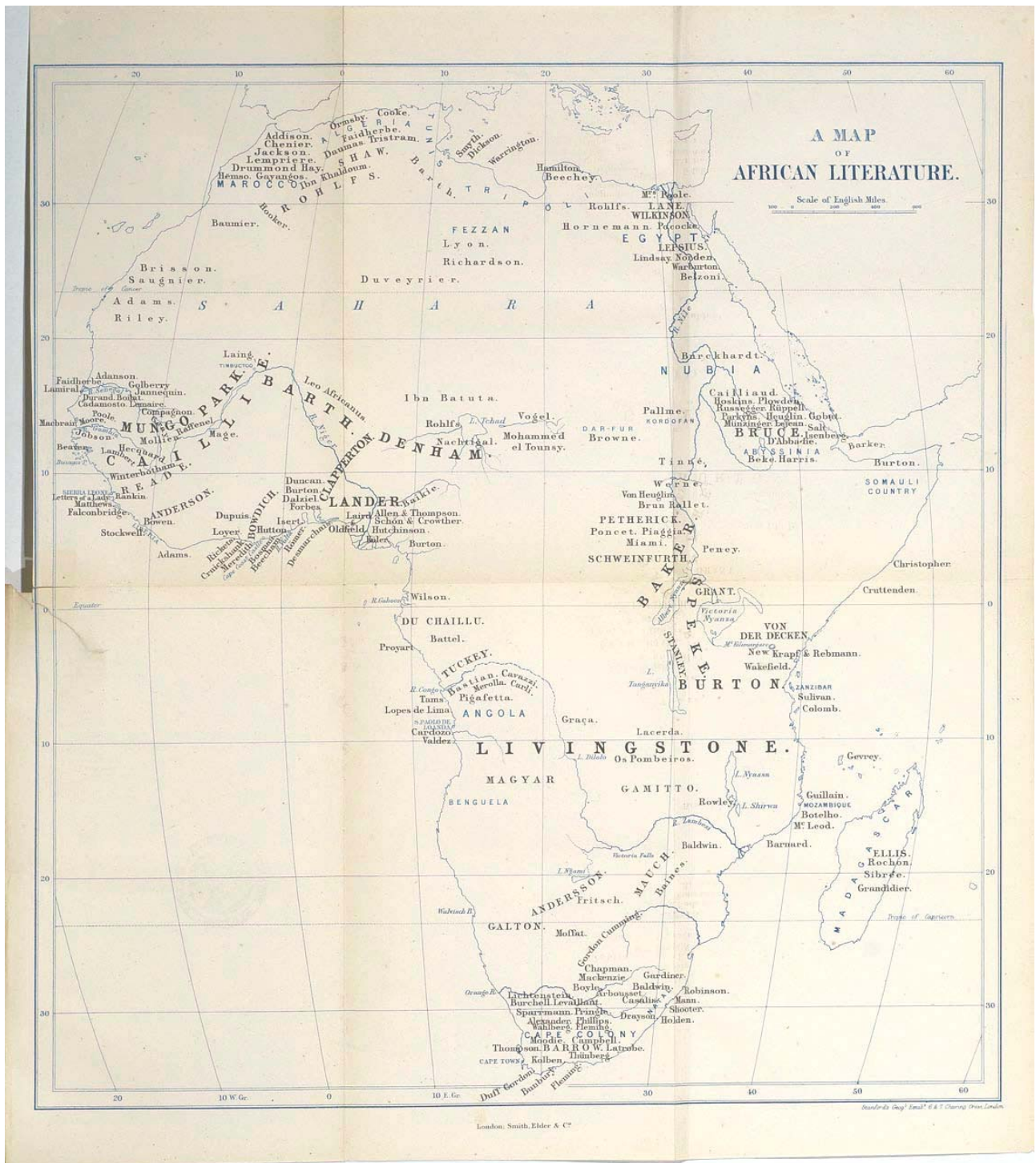
In connecting Africa to a narrative of global progress, *The Martyrdom of Man* offered Du Bois a model for his own attempt to re-think African history at a key moment in the history of empire and decolonization. In fact Reade originally intended to call his own book ‘Africa’s Place in World History’, anticipating Du Bois even more precisely. If African historical experience looms less large in the *Martyrdom* than its successor, it nonetheless shaped Reade’s perspective – from his account of the influence of ancient Egypt on the Greeks, through the history of Islam to the ‘moral revolution’ against the trans-Atlantic slave trade which was situated in a longer history of rebellion against feudal and religious oppression. Although he proudly counted himself a disciple of Darwin, Reade’s version of evolutionary history (like that of H. G. Wells in *The Outline of History*) owed more to the

progressive optimism of Comte or Spencer: there was, after all, a purpose in the story of human struggle. And this is where Du Bois found inspiration for his own, very different, version of a hopeful, progressive and collective history of the black race: a history that would see the destiny of humanity on the continent of Africa fulfilled, but only through renewed political emancipation.

In seeking new models for African history in a postcolonial age, historians of Africa have paid relatively little attention to the work of their predecessors, including both Reade and Du Bois. The development of research and teaching in this field from the 1950s – in Britain, Europe and North America, as well as in Africa itself – has transformed our understanding of the economic, social and political histories of African societies. Furthermore, new sources of evidence – notably oral, anthropological and archaeological – have supplemented use of a much wider range of written and visual sources. At the same time, the historical experience of decolonization, nation-building, social change, postcolonial conflict and environmental crisis in contemporary Africa have generated concerns amongst its historians. Today the field of African history is large and inevitably diverse, not to say fragmented. Universal or Pan-African histories, tainted by their colonial, racial or nationalist associations, seem to belong to another age. But in one key respect, today's historians share Du Bois' faith in African agency and creativity: far from being simply a stage on which colonial fantasies are played out, Africa is a place from where new things come.³

What hope, then, for rediscovering African geographies? It must of course be acknowledged that geographers and explorers, together with missionaries and colonial officials, played a key role in the creation of an enduring image of Africa as the 'Dark Continent' which remains closely associated with the age of empire.⁴ In this view, geography was essentially a European discipline in all senses of the term – a means of ordering the supposed primal chaos of African realities. In the vanguard of what Joseph Conrad once called 'Geography Militant' were the explorers of Africa. Winwood Reade's own 'Map of African Literature', published in 1873, offered an exemplary view of their achievement: the names of explorers are plotted in proportion to their perceived contribution to the knowledge of Africa, clustering along the major rivers - Niger, Nile, Congo and Zambesi – with minor tributaries flowing away from each. This map offers a powerful metaphor for understanding how Europeans understood the making of African geography through the accretion of an authoritative, textual archive – in this view, places become known only through the process of writing about them in a form recognized by European science. So, when he finally reached the banks of the Niger in 1869, the first thing Winwood Reade reached for was his copy of Herodotus.

Yet this same archive of geographical exploration offers many more possibilities for the rediscovery of another kind of African geography. For example, in the library of the Royal Geographical Society, we can find works by James Africanus Horton of Sierra Leone and Edward Blyden of Liberia, nineteenth-century critics of European stereotypes of African culture. Blyden's criticisms of the ignorance of European explorers concerning African societies merits re-reading today, not least because he travelled in Liberia briefly with Winwood Reade. The notion that people of African descent might claim a special authority in the discovery of new knowledge about the continent was also reflected in the writings of Martin Delany, an African-American polymath who organized a scientific expedition to the Niger region in 1859 with the Jamaican Robert Campbell, as reported in the *Journal of the RGS*.⁵ The Quaker doctor Thomas Hodgkin, RGS Secretary at this time, was instrumental in associating the Society with their expedition. Another notable example of African-authored geography is provided by Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the Yoruba recaptive employed as an interpreter on the 1841 Niger expedition, who was an active supporter of Delany's project. Later appointed the first African Bishop in the Anglican Church, he was to be honoured by the RGS: his name appears on Winwood Reade's map alongside that of the German missionary and linguistic expert, James Schön.

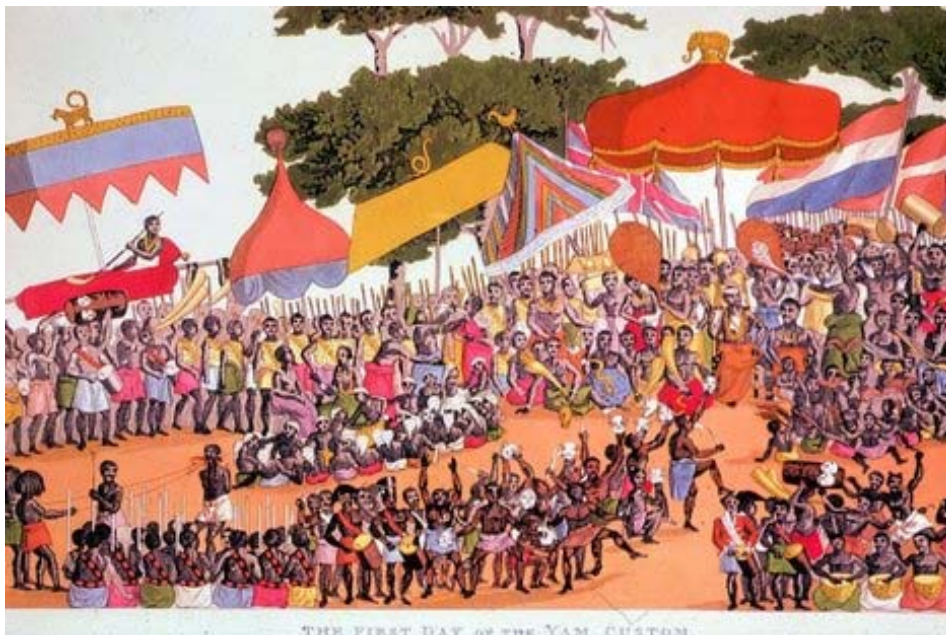


'Map of African Literature', from *The African Sketch-Book* by William Winwood Reade (1873)

As these examples suggest, the historical collections of a body like the RGS may provide evidence of unfamiliar aspects of the history of travel and exploration in Africa. True, the RGS – like many geographical societies across Europe – was closely associated with the history of empire-making, notably in the era of the 'Scramble for Africa' in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. It was not just that projects of geographical discovery yielded new facts about African worlds: these projects, as conceived in Europe, also frequently depended on an explicitly imperial vision, expressed as much in the rhetoric of European philanthropy in the 'Dark Continent' as it was – eventually - on the map of Africa itself. Yet in amongst the vast collections of the RGS – its maps, books, journals,

.....
pictures and artefacts – there are fragments of other views, pieces of evidence that may offer the twenty-first century explorer a different course through African history.

Take the literature of African travel, for example. The same sorts of sources which were used to construct Reade's map of African literature have since been used for very different purposes by modern historians of African societies. A book such as Thomas Bowdich's *Mission From Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, published in 1819 by John Murray, provides one example. Essentially the product of an intelligence-gathering expedition organized by a trading company, it can nonetheless yield much more than simply evidence of European power or prejudice (although it certainly does that). Read critically, and alongside other kinds of evidence, it remains an important account of the powerful Asante state at the height of its power, including valuable evidence concerning its history, law, culture, economy and language. Bowdich's diplomatic mission, intended to establish closer trading relations between British traders and the Asante, was more or less a failure: but his report remains a key source for historians of the Asante to this day.⁶



Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee by Thomas Bowdich (1819)

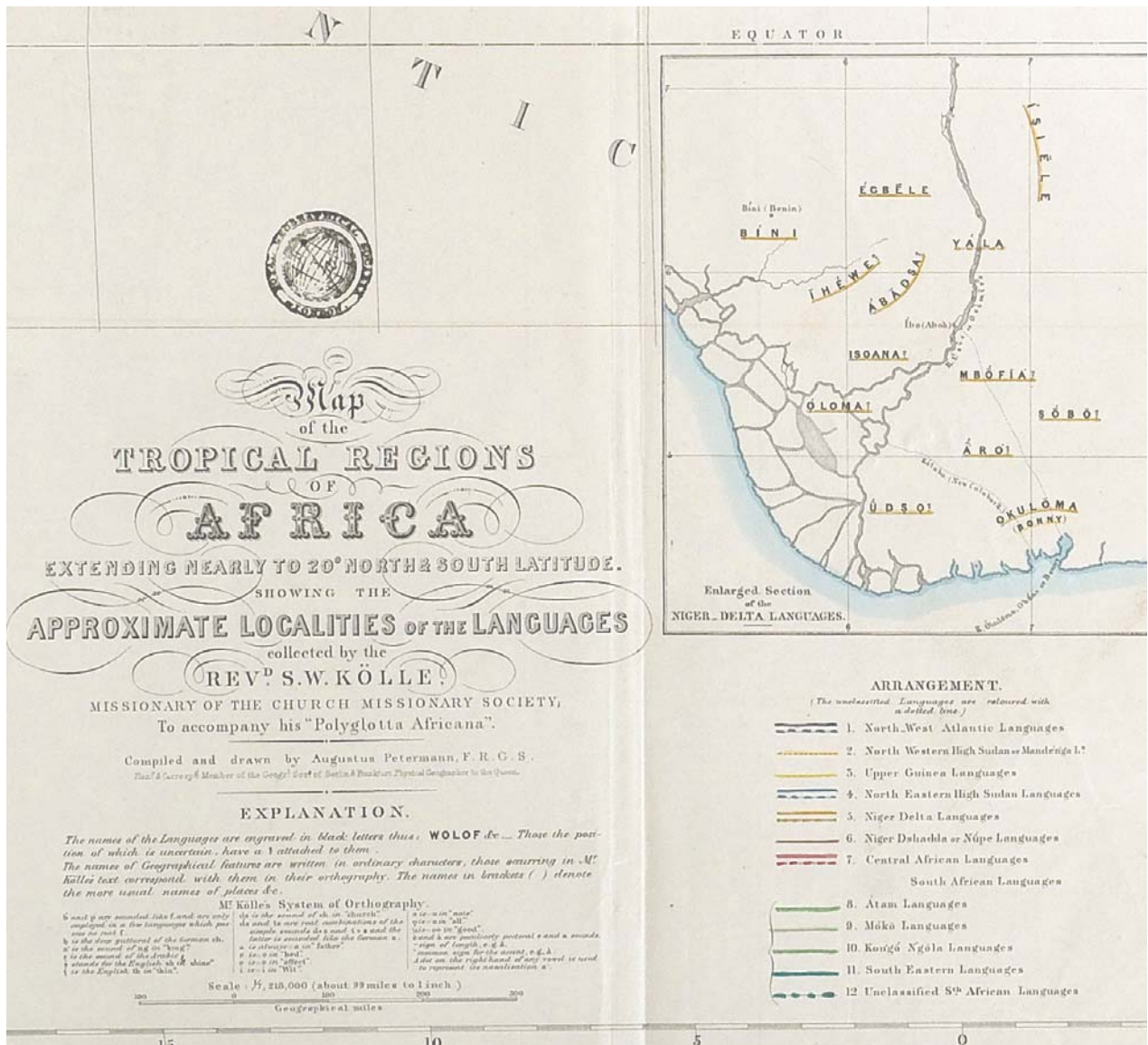
Also of interest to historians are still earlier travel narratives, many of which were direct products of the economic exploitation of Africans. The writings of Willem Bosman, a Dutch slave-trader on the Gold Coast at the end of the seventeenth century, or Jean Barbot, a Huguenot slave-trader writing about West Africa in the same period, have thus proved valuable resources for African historians when handled judiciously and in context. These texts certainly cannot be regarded as neutral sources: they do not speak for themselves, but neither do they speak purely of their authors. In the work of historical geographers such as Judith Carney, the observational evidence scattered throughout such texts may be placed alongside other sources – including many other written accounts, oral history and archaeological evidence – in order to reconstruct aspects of the diet and food cultures of enslaved Africans, and their transfer to the Americas. In the process, a wholly new view of the transatlantic influence of African food culture and botanical knowledge has emerged in which the endurance, creativity and memory of Africans takes centre-stage.⁷

Much of the European literature on exploration portrays Africa through European eyes: so many landscapes to be described, river courses traced, resources assessed, peoples observed. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to

conclude from this that the business of African exploration was the preserve of Europeans. On the contrary, it required the support and guidance of African men and women in a variety of forms, from physical labour to military protection. The hidden histories of the African contribution to the history of exploration are now receiving increasing attention.⁸ In addition to their labour and hospitality, travellers of many different kinds – including traders, missionaries, naturalists, and tourists – often relied on the testimony of Africans. Some explorers, like David Livingstone, devoted key sections of their published narratives – in this case, the best-selling *Missionary Travels* (1857) – to accounts of dialogue with named Africans. For Livingstone, it was important to demonstrate that ‘native information’, as it was called, could be a reliable source of evidence concerning the physical geography and history of Africa. Describing a journey across the Kalahari desert, for example, he drew attention to indigenous skills in locating and preserving water sources, knowledge which would not be available to outsiders. The map accompanying *Missionary Travels*, compiled by John Arrowsmith, one of England’s leading cartographers, contains a note stating that the positions of rivers and lakes marked in dotted lines were based on ‘Oral geographical information which Dr. Livingstone collected from intelligent Natives with whom he conversed during his Travels across Africa’.⁹

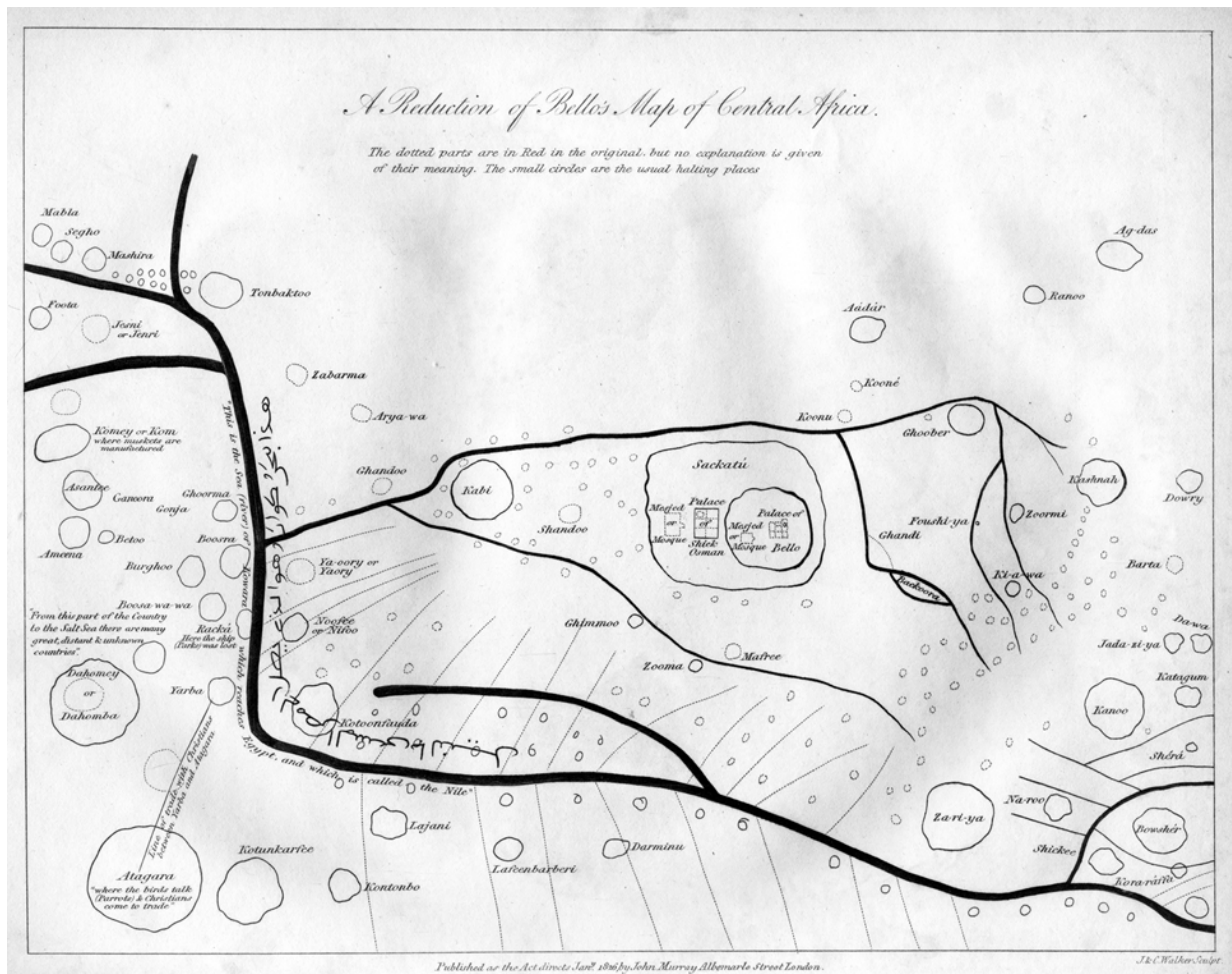
Livingstone’s accounts of his conversations with Africans, though hardly unvarnished, do at least attempt to give voice to African experience. If these dialogues are read carefully and critically, they can reveal something of the complex worlds which Livingstone was attempting to negotiate. Inspired by their interest in providing religious education in local languages, missionaries in many parts of the world were active in the compilation of glossaries, vocabularies and dictionaries, and these texts can also provide powerful evidence concerning African culture and society. In 1854, for example, Sigismund Wilhelm Koelle of the Church Missionary Society published *Polyglotta Africana*, an extraordinary comparative vocabulary in over one hundred languages based on extensive interviews with former slaves living in Freetown, Sierra Leone. ‘Living natives were the only source from which the information was derived’, wrote Koelle in his preface, ‘no book or vocabulary of any sort was consulted’.¹⁰ As well as recording words and phrases used by liberated Africans, Koelle made very careful notes about his respondents, giving name, region of origin, date of departure from that country and the number of fellow countrymen in the colony. Complete with a remarkable linguistic map drawn by the cartographer Augustus Petermann, Koelle’s evidence remains a vital source for African historians interested in mapping the diverse origins and experiences of enslaved Africans originating from the whole of West and central Africa.¹¹

The maps of Livingstone and Koelle, based as they are in part on African oral testimony, suggest that Victorian geographers had a more generous attitude to what counted as reliable evidence – and by extension, as scientific knowledge – than is sometimes assumed. In the last fifty years, historians of cartography have studied many different kinds of maps made in Africa – including indigenous maps, as well as those made by European-trained cartographers – and have begun to find much more evidence of African agency in map-making than was previously acknowledged. The reliance of African explorers on ‘native testimony’ as well as direct observation, which became controversial in the debates over John Hanning Speke’s claims to have discovered the sources of the Nile, was routine until the 1870s; even the geographical speculations of ‘theoretical’ geographers, such as James MacQueen, were based partly on evidence drawn directly or indirectly from African oral evidence as well as ancient and modern texts.¹² Historians now know much more about the extent and variety of map-making traditions in tropical Africa, correcting the misapprehension common in early histories of cartography that Africans did not have the cognitive ability to make maps. Cosmographic maps representing divine spatial order and mnemonic maps expressing origin myths in spatial terms are to be found in many different forms within African cultures, from rock art to ceramics.¹³



Detail from map by Augustus Petermann in *Polyglotta Africana* by Sigismund Wilhelm Koelle (1854)

In the nineteenth century, European explorers depended on indigenous geographical knowledge in constructing their own maps and theories. One of the most celebrated examples is the map of the river Quarra (Niger) given to Hugh Clapperton (1788-1827) in 1824 by the Sultan of the Sokoto caliphate, Mohammed Bello (1797-1837). According to Clapperton, the Sultan drew maps depicting the course of the river in the sand, and subsequently presented him with a printed map (the latter probably based on Arabic texts); an engraved version of the latter (not altogether consistent with the former) was published in the travel narrative published by John Murray in 1826.¹⁴ At Sokoto, Clapperton also collected other maps of the main caravan routes, drawn from or by resident Arab traders and slaves, which also found their way into the RGS collections. These maps included not only directions and distances between staging posts, but also a variety of hydrographic, topographic, toponymic and political information. However, as the African historian Camille Lefebvre has argued, such documents ought not to be read as abstract expressions of a timeless 'indigenous knowledge'. The work of more than one hand, they bear witness to very particular moments of encounter and exchange, shaped by the respective interests of the parties involved.¹⁵



Sultan Bello's Map of Central Africa, as published in *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa in 1822-4*, by Dixon Denham and Hugh Clapperton (1826)

This perspective on maps as documents of intercultural exchange can be useful more in considering other kinds of maps produced by both Africans and Europeans in the nineteenth century. Explorers' maps frequently absorbed aspects of indigenous knowledge as reflected in their use of place names and in the conjectural mapping of rivers. Meanwhile, the process of African mapmaking increasingly reflected European influences, notably in the materials used, orientation and survey methods. One good example is provided by the major topographic survey of Bamum in the western Cameroon undertaken by the enterprising King, Ibrahim Njoya (c. 1875-1933), in the early twentieth century. In this case, just as in the colonial maps of the same period, cartography was as much a political tool as a scientific object.¹⁶

Modern geographical collections, such as those of the RGS-IBG, provide exciting opportunities for those who wish to rediscover African geographies – not just the geographies we think we already know, but the unfamiliar and indeed unknown geographies that may be encountered by today's intrepid explorers who know where and how to look. While research in these collections is undoubtedly enhanced by a knowledge of African history and by a knowledge of the history of the collections themselves, in an age of electronic media the fruits of these knowledges are now much more readily accessible than ever before. In any case, prior knowledge alone is insufficient to guide the twenty-first century explorer on journeys through the archive. One thing more is needed, and that is a willingness to be surprised: from Africa, still, new things may come.

Notes

- ¹ D. Hammond, A. Jablow, *The Africa that Never Was* (New York, 1970). On Reade and Du Bois, see F. Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Oxford, 2001), chap. 5; R. Law, 'Du Bois as a pioneer in African history' in M. Keller and C. J. Fontenot, eds., *Re-cognizing W. E. B. Du Bois in the Twenty-First Century* (Macon, Georgia, 2007).
- ² W. Reade, *The Martyrdom of Man* (London, 1943 ed.), xxi.
- ³ For an interesting application of such a perspective, see D. Northrup, *Africa's Discovery of Europe, 1450-1850* (Oxford, 2002). For current research on African history, see the contents of periodicals such as *Journal of African History*, *History in Africa* and *African Affairs*.
- ⁴ P. Brantlinger, 'Victorians and Africans; the genealogy of the myth of the Dark Continent' *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985) 166-203.
- ⁵ M. Delany and R. Campbell, 'Geographical observations on Western Africa', *Proceedings of the RGS* 4 (1859-60), 218-22. An important work which puts Delany's expedition in the context of transatlantic thinking about race is P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (London, 1993). On other African American expeditions, see J. Fairhead, T. Geysbeek, S. Holsoe and M. Leach, eds., *African-American Exploration in West Africa: Four Nineteenth-Century Diaries* (Bloomington, 2003).
- ⁶ T. E. Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee, with a Statistical Account of that Kingdom, and Geographical Notices of Other Parts of the Interior of Africa* (London, 1819). See also J. D. Fage, 'On the reproduction and editing of classics of African history', *Journal of African History* 8 (1967) 157-61; T. C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante* (Cambridge, 1995).
- ⁷ J. Carney and R. N. Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley, 2010).
- ⁸ F. Driver and L. M. Jones, *Hidden Histories of Exploration* (London, 2009).
- ⁹ D. Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (London, 1857).
- ¹⁰ S. Koelle, *Polyglotta Africana: or, a Comparative Vocabulary of Nearly Three Hundred Words and Phrases, in more than One Hundred Distinct African Languages* (London, 1854), iv.
- ¹¹ P. D. Curtin and J. Vansina, 'Sources of the nineteenth-century Atlantic slave trade', *Journal of African History* 5 (1964) 185-208; P. Hair, 'The enslavement of Koelle's informants', *Journal of African History* 6 (1965) 193-203.
- ¹² On Speke, see A. Wisnicki, 'Cartographical quandaries: the limits of knowledge production in Burton's and Speke's search for the source of the Nile', *History in Africa* 35 (2008) 455-79; on MacQueen, see D. Lambert, 'Taken captive by the mystery of the great river: towards an historical geography of British geography and African slavery', *Journal of Historical Geography* 35 (2009) 44-65.
- ¹³ T. J. Bassett, 'Indigenous mapmaking in intertropical Africa' in E. Woodward and G. Malcolm Lewis, eds., *The History of Cartography, vol. 2 Book 3: Cartography in the Traditional African, American, Arctic, Australian and Pacific Societies* (Chicago, 1998), 24-48.
- ¹⁴ D. Denham and C. Clapperton, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa* (London, 1826); C. Lefebvre, I. Surun, 'Exploration et transferts de savoir: deux cartes produites par des Africains au debut du XIXe siècle' (2008), <http://mappemonde.mgm.fr/num20/articles/art08405.html>
- ¹⁵ C. Lefebvre, 'Itinéraires de sable: parole, geste et écrit au Soudan central au XIX^e siècle', *Annales HSS* 64 (2009) 797-824. The route maps collected by Clapperton were later presented to the RGS by W. D. Cooley.
- ¹⁶ Njoya's maps survive in various forms in European archives: Bassett, 'Indigenous mapmaking in intertropical Africa', 41-5.