

THE NAMING OF PLACES ON AFRICAN MAPS

The earliest maps of Africa, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, were full of names; but this gives a deceptive impression of what was 'known' about the continent's geography or people at that period. Adam Jones (1987) has plotted on a series of sketch-maps just how little African territory was actually described at first hand at different periods from 1400 on.¹ However, the lack of first-hand reportage before the mid-nineteenth century did not deter the map-makers from filling up their images of the continent with a myriad of names, culled from every literary source, from classical times onward. Consider, for example, the crowded maps of Hondius, Homann, and Ortelius. As the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth, the basis on which cartographers accepted evidence for the authentic places and names of inner Africa changed, and blank spaces came to replace the luxuriant detail of the earlier versions.² A concern for accuracy of placing and exactitude of naming came to dominate the making of African maps from the late nineteenth century and throughout the early colonial period of exploration, military appropriation and the securing of basic intelligence for administrative control. The blank spaces were steadily filled in. Given this new mapped-out pattern of fragments from spoken language, deliberately culled not from Western literature but from field investigations, a scholarly interest developed in the middle and late colonial periods, among both professionals and amateurs, in the meaning and explanation of names. This curiosity about the significance and origin of names took over

¹ One may compare Plates 5 and 33 in Page 1958.

² Contrast Plates 17 and 37 in Tooley 1969.

from the practical fact-finding of the initial colonial period. Names on maps became the fodder for a different sort of intelligence.

Corresponding to these three periods we can distinguish three modes of onomastic interest in African maps: first, the textual-representational; second, the factual-investigatory; and third, the scholarly-speculative (a concern which has led among other things to the series of colloquia in which this essay was first delivered as a paper). Let me characterize and illustrate these three broad concerns (still with us in varying degrees).

1. *The Early Onomastic Style, In Which Maps Were To Reflect Textual Images*

This style could be said to have persisted from antiquity up to the early nineteenth century as a dominant mode, but it continues to the present in certain regions of the imaginative representation of Africa. In this tradition of enquiry, a range of names as such, embedded in literary texts, is already well known. But the problem is where to put them on the map. We know *what* we are looking for, but *where* is it? Examples abound: the capital of Prester John, the Mountains of the Moon, Meroe, Kush, Libya, Nubia, Monomotapa, and later, Timbuktu, Hausa etc. Names were collected from classical texts, from the Bible, and from medieval Arab travellers in particular. These names were used to decorate the sheet and to complement the artistic motifs; Swift's well-known lines remind us that 'Geographers, in Afric maps, / With savage pictures fill their gaps, / And oe'r unhabitable downs / Place elephants for want of towns.' Robin Hallett (1964) has recorded the efforts of the African Association in the late eighteenth century to find the West African city of 'Hausa', known only from rumour and second-hand report, to send a scientific observer there and decide where it should be reliably placed on the map. A very interesting illustration of these early attempts at systematic knowledge was the problem of 'Adofoodia', supposedly to the north of Dahomey. The traveller John Duncan in the early nineteenth century, who published a book in 1847, claimed to have been there; but doubts crept in later, and it is not at all clear whether he might not have made the whole thing up. The name was eventually omitted from French military maps; one explanation, as convincing as any, was that it may have represented a rude word in Yoruba (cf. Marion Johnson 1974).

2. *The Onomastic Style of Professional Exploration, Military Appropriation and Early Colonial Administration*

The map-maker here starts off not with a text, but with a blank sheet and a stout pair of boots. First, the place is found, and then the name is sought (rather than the other way around). Instead of asking, 'Where should this name be placed on my map?' -

the investigator announces, '*Here's* a place, now *what* is it called?' This onomastic enquiry is not in the interests of mere scholarly curiosity, but thinly cloaks the need to know in order to manage. Names were collected in their thousands from the late nineteenth century onwards from a wide variety of oral sources, mostly local and therefore assumed authentic. Where this kind of local authenticity could not be tapped, names were deliberately made up on the spot, and through being marked on the official map, given a political reality. For smaller places, anything would do: names of odd hills, bits of rivers, odd chiefs, partial scraps of language here and there, all were given a new permanence. For large and splendid places, the heroic motif dominated: names of soldiers and explorers, European patrons, royalty and noblemen back home, or officials of the exploration societies. These sources of names were sometimes mixed up- but attention was not upon the credentials of the source as such, as it had been in the earlier era. The overriding concern was to mark the political appropriation of the place. A certain amount of competition was evident between European powers. You have a place, *name* it and you have it taped, especially if on a map upon the basis of which a treaty may be signed.

Occasionally the names chosen in this style of naming were indeed from the ancient sources, but established anew with the authority of empirical discovery among the speakers of a native language. Here is the explorer Speke, drawing indirectly on Ptolemy as he begins to ascend mountains at the northern end of the Tanganyika Lake in January 1858:

This mountain mass I consider to be the TRUE MOUNTAINS OF THE MOON, regarding which so many erroneous speculations have been made. I infer this because they lie beyond Unyamwezi (country of the Moon), and must have been first mentioned to geographical enquirers by the Wanyamuezi (people of the Moon), who have from time out of mind visited the coast, and must have been the first who gave information of them (quoted in Richards and Place 1960: 131).

Most explorers' names for what they regarded as their own discoveries were, however, modern and European in their reference. Speke in 1862 writes as follows of his naming, in fact, 'christening', of the falls emerging from the newly-found great lake:

The expedition had now performed its functions. I saw that old father Nile without any doubt rises in the Victoria Nyanza, and, as I had foretold, that lake is the source of the holy river which cradled the first expounder of our religious belief ... I now christened the 'stones' Ripon Falls, after the nobleman who presided over the Royal Geographical Society when my expedition was got up; and the arm of water from which the Nile flowed, Napoleon Channel, in token of respect for the French Geographical Society for the honour they had done me, just before leaving England, in presenting me with their gold medal for the discovery of the Victoria Nyanza (ibid.: 150).

Baker, meanwhile, had been approaching the great lakes from the north; he writes in similar vein of his major discovery in 1861:

The glory of our prize burst suddenly upon me! There, like a sea of quicksilver, lay far beneath the grand expanse of water.... It is impossible to describe the triumph of that moment.... As an imperishable memorial to one loved and mourned by our gracious Queen and deplored by every Englishman, I called this great lake 'the Albert N'yanza'. The Victoria and the Albert lakes are the two sources of the Nile (*ibid.*: 173).

Most of these names were not so imperishable, and have now been 'Africanized': for example, the summit of Kilimanjaro, once Kaiser Wilhelm Spitze, is now Uhuru Peak, and Lake Albert has been renamed Lake Mobutu Sese Seko. A few did not even stick at the time - for example, Teleki and Hohnel named some mountains 'General Matthews Chain' after their patron in Zanzibar; while their label 'Lake Rudolph' after His Royal and Imperial Highness the Prince of Austria (who had taken a gracious interest in their plans) did last to the 1960s, General Matthews scarcely made the official maps at all. The geologist J.W. Gregory had almost a free hand in naming the detailed topography of Mount Kenya and has given us a fascinating account:

As it is impossible to describe the mountain without names, some have had to be invented. I should not, of course, think of applying European terms to places for which native names are already in existence; but in a locality where there are no names, there can be no reasonable objection to proposing them (*ibid.*: 279).

He names Teleki Valley and Mount Hohnel after these explorers:

For the main valley on the south side of the mountain I propose the name of the Hobbly Valley, as it is probably the one which the British East Africa Company's Expedition would have entered had it traversed the whole of the forest zone. The tarns upon the floor of this valley I beg to call after Mr W. Bird Thompson, the caravan leader of that expedition. When we come to the glaciers and the central peak the names are not so obvious... The principal glacier is on the south side of the mountain, and to it I gave the name of the Lewis Glacier, out of respect to the late Henry Carvell Lewis, whose brilliant researches have thrown so much light on glacial problems in England and America (*ibid.*: 280).

A less heroic, but no less imperialistic, mode of naming operated at a lower level in the early colonial period. I do not have space to detail the long lists of place-names given textual existence in the trek itineraries of officers of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan for example, lists drawing on Arabic, English and African vernaculars indiscriminately, and sometimes mixing them (especially

where interpreters from one vernacular explain terms from several others). One or two examples must suffice: the Bertha-language *bela shangul* (meaning 'rounded rock') becomes Bela Shangul, interpreted as 'sons of' (Arabic) 'the Shangalla' (Amharic for 'negroes in the wild'). The place-names Amwot el Kebir and Amwot el Sogheir, i.e. Great and Little Amwot, are composed of a Dinka-ized substantive (Amwot) and Arabic qualifiers; but the names are actually Nuer, Mwot Dit and Mwot Tot. The Nuer versions were used to replace the older ones on the official maps after a civil inspector was put in Lou Nuer country in 1917 and realised that the earlier versions were supplied by a Dinka-speaking guide who knew a little Arabic and was translating the adjectives for the benefit of the original military patrol. Occasionally jokes were made at the expense of the natives: in the Ingessana Hills, there are two main village foci. One is called Soda. The other one appears on the pre-War maps as Wisko, but more recently has been restored to its rightful name Bau. Ambiguities were rife; Doleib Hill in Shilluk country, where a mission was established, is as flat a stretch of clay plain as you could wish to find in the upper Nile. The *doleib* palms are there for all to see, but visitors wonder where is the hill. The term must surely be a wishful corruption of the Arabic *hilla*, a village or settlement.

3. *The Late Colonial Armchair Onomastic Style*

This style is perhaps our very own. Looking back over the wealth of names we find in texts, on maps, and in our own field diaries, we select a name and ask: 'What does this name mean?' What does it reveal, or perhaps conceal, about history, about languages, psychology, and anthropology? Given the wide provenance of names scattered in abundance over the maps of Africa by the post-First World War period, there were puzzles aplenty for the colonial scholar-gentleman. Names could be matched text with text by the more academic-minded of those in the Sudan Political Service, for example; and names could be matched between text and place, or even place and place, by those of practical curiosity on the spot. In this latter style, the map itself is taken to be a primary source (whether a twentieth-century military trek or an illuminated medieval version of Ptolemy).

Short articles began to appear in journals like *Sudan Notes and Records* [SNR]. H.C. Jackson wrote, for example, on the meaning of 'Omdurman' in his *Sudan Days and Ways* (1954: 84). An exchange of opinion took place on the meaning of 'Mongalla' in SNR in the late 1930s. An article on Suakin, also in SNR, devoted several paragraphs and various alternative lurid tales to a discussion of the meaning of its name, and this was followed by correspondence in 1938 and 1939. Shortage of space forbids me the pleasure of quoting from many of these period pieces. But I would like to close by referring to T.H.R. Owen's only part-joking take-off of the onomastic game, in his letter to SNR on the name 'Wau' (1950). He suggests various types of plausible theory on the origin of this

name: the Corruptive Theory (from a local Bongo word meaning 'market'); the Philological Theory ('the slave-raiders who permeated the South ... hit upon the expedient of describing the principal centres by letters of the Arabic alphabet. All have now fallen into desuetude save two only - YEI and WAU'); and the Historical Theory. According to this, the Dinka agreed to attack an Ansar camp at night, and to use a distinctive battle cry in order to distinguish friend from foe - 'WOW, WOW, WOW!' The Botanical Theory (too involved to summarise here) is then followed by the Anthropological Theory, which treats of the Beja word *wau* meaning 'honey'; other evidence is adduced of traces of the Beja tongue in the Bahr-el-Ghazal, and the Hadendowa tradition of a southern origin; moreover if the Jur coiffure of ringlets were only turned upside down, it would resemble the Beja hairstyle:

From the above evidence the trained anthropologist will easily conclude that the Hadendowa and the Jur are of common origin and that the former, before their migration to the inhospitable Red Sea Hills, made Wau their headquarters for the honey-hunting which formed so important a feature of their livelihood.

At last Owen offers the Plain Theory: 'It is simply a Dinka name.'³

To name a place, on a map, is to try and stamp some certainty on the world. But to look into naming too carefully undermines all sense of certainty.

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³ There are several different places called 'Wau' in the Shilluk, Jur and Dinka country today, and Douglas Johnson has told me that it does indeed seem to be an old Dinka usage. Although so well established it may not be capable of yielding a reliable 'meaning', it is common today to hear local explanations of the term. Dinka and Shilluk commonly say that 'Wau' is an expression of surprise (which might for example follow the killing of an important man), and the name 'Wau' commemorates a surprising event which once took place in that locality.

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