CARTOGRAPHY AND EMPIRE BUILDING IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY WEST AFRICA*

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ABSTRACT. Maps served as both instruments and representations of expanding European influence into Africa during the nineteenth century. They contributed to empire building by promoting, assisting, and legitimating the projection of European power. Through the use of cartographical elements such as color, cartouches, vignettes, boundary lines, and blank spaces, mapmakers participated in the conquest and colonization of Africa.

A familiar image of the late-nineteenth-century scramble for Africa is that of European diplomats at the Berlin Conference from 15 November 1884 to 26 February 1885 huddled around a map of the continent as they drew the boundaries of their purported possessions and spheres of influence. That cartographic partition of Africa inextricably linked map-making and empire building. Yet the act of drawing lines on maps is only one example of how cartography furthered imperialism. Maps were used in various ways to extend European hegemony over foreign and often unknown territory.

In this article I examine a series of nineteenth-century map elements of West Africa as texts that formed an integral part of political discourse about the colonization of Africa. Far from being neutral representations of African human and physical geography, they contributed to empire by promoting, assisting, and legitimating the extension of French and British power into West Africa. The mapmaker's graphic language of color, cartouches, vignettes, boundaries, and blank spaces is interpreted in the context of empire building. From a theoretical perspective, this study views cartographic truth as an example of the exercise of power, linked to the will to dominate and control (Foucault 1980, 131). Because maps are an expression of the "territorial imperatives of a particular political system," they are both instruments and representations of power (Harley 1988a).

This study focuses first on how maps in very practical ways promoted and assisted European expansion and then on how cartographic techniques furthered imperialism. By providing detailed information on the location of villages, roads, and natural resources, maps facilitated troop movements, settlement, and commercial activities. Additionally, I explain how the use of blank spaces, color, and boundaries advanced territorial expansion. Decorative and authoritative dimensions of maps served to legitimate the process of empire building. As symbols of imperial power and ideology, decorative

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elements both sanctioned and celebrated the appropriation of African space. By highlighting the multiple ways in which maps facilitated the European conquest of West Africa, this article suggests that the cartographic drama of the Berlin Conference was only one example of how maps entered into the political discourse on colonialism.

Mapping the Terrain of Conquest

The basic function of a map is to indicate location, relative position, and routes of travel. By providing geographical information in a convenient and standardized format, cartographers helped open West Africa to European conquest, commerce, and colonization. A late-eighteenth-century–early-nineteenth-century example is “A Map Shewing the Progress of Discovery & Improvement in the Geography of North Africa” by James Rennell (Fig. 1). Rennell was the geographical consultant to the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa, also known as the African Association. His map was a compilation of the most recent geographical knowledge provided by explorers like Mungo Park and Frederick Horne-mann, whose expeditions were sponsored by the African Association. The map contained new information, such as the easterly flow of the Niger River, a geographical fact of interest to merchants and mapmakers. The map also showed the locations of towns, ethnic groups, empires, and relative distances that were previously unknown to Western Europeans. Some data, like the fictitious Mountains of Kong and the interior drainage pattern of the Niger, were incorrect (Bassett and Porter 1991).

Soldiers and explorers alike carried the most recent and authoritative maps with them in the field. One of the most important cartographers of Africa during the late nineteenth century was Regnault de Lannoy de Bissy. He spent most of the 1880s with the Service Géographique de l’Armée in Paris, where he compiled a 63-sheet map of Africa based on explorers’ accounts and nearly 1,800 route maps. It was a relatively large-scale (1:2,000,000) map that could be used by explorers and surveyors in the field. Many of the maps were accompanied by descriptions of major political and physical geographical features and a bibliography of sources that had been consulted (Ministère de la Guerre 1882). In 1889 the entire map was exhibited at the Exposition Universelle, and at his death it was still the largest map of Africa (Maunoir 1890). In recognition of his contribution to geographical knowledge of Africa the Paris Geographical Society awarded Lannoy its prestigious gold medal. Lannoy himself called attention to the usefulness of the map in an address to the French Association for the Advancement of Science; he noted that the Congo sections had been used at the Berlin Conference and that the map of Madagascar was used by the French army (Lannoy de Bissy 1885, 686).

Lannoy’s maps of the upper Senegal and Niger rivers illustrate French expansion into West Africa during the late nineteenth century. For example,
the Ségou Sikoro sheet (Fig. 2) shows a succession of recently constructed forts linking the two river basins where a railroad was being planned. The northwestern corner of the map is filled with great detail, in contrast with the unexplored eastern and southern sections, which are blank. The progression of flags eastward suggests a sense of movement toward these unknown areas, which were controlled by African rulers like Samori Touré and Tiéba Traoré. In his geographical description of the Ségou Sikoro sheet, Lannoy wrote, "It is in this immense country that we have just sketched..."
that France is destined to play a considerable civilizing and pacifying role” (Ministère de la Guerre 1882, notice 24:2). The “civilizing mission” was led by columns of French and African troops who fought fierce battles with the indigenous peoples. Military surveyors, also known as topographers, played an important role in that geographical conquest of West Africa (Gallieni 1887).

Topographers accompanied or preceded military expeditions like the missions of Gustave Borgnis-Desbordes and Joseph S. Gallieni into the western Sudan. The topographers assigned to those military columns not only surveyed future railroad corridors but also opened routes to facilitate troop movements against resistance forces. For example, the Derrien topographical mission of 1880–81 that surveyed the area between Medine and the Niger River for the proposed Senegal-Niger railroad was instructed to gather information on local populations, settlement patterns, commerce, and the military capability of both friendly and hostile villages (ANSOM S.G. Sénégal IV, d. 74). Under the heading of military considerations, the topographers with the mission were to obtain information on village fortifications, the best way to attack villages, and sources of food provisions. By showing the exact location of villages, trails, fields, and granaries, as well as local relief and vegetation types, the topographical maps produced by the mission provided the “desirable accuracy” that French officers valued during their military campaigns (ANSOM S.G. Sénégal IV, d. 75). Lannoy also made use of those surveyors’ maps and field notes in compiling his maps of West Africa.
References in the reports of military officers and explorers are evidence that maps were instrumental to the geographical conquest of West Africa. The comments of Gallieni and Louis G. Binger on the accuracy and utility of Lannoy’s maps illustrate this link. For example, Gallieni used the maps during his campaigns in the western Sudan. As he moved into unsurveyed territory and his topographers went to work, he was aware that the expedition was obtaining information to fill in blank spaces on contemporary maps. In a letter to the Paris Geographical Society dated 29 April 1887 Gallieni (1887, 375) wrote, “This year you can see that we have made great strides towards the south and that I have given some breathing room to our line of posts. Mr. de Lannoy will have many great changes to make on his map; the French Sudan will henceforth appear prominently.”

Like Gallieni, Binger used Lannoy’s maps on an expedition from the Niger to the Guinea coast between 1887 and 1889. Binger was a French military officer sent by the Colonial Department and the Foreign Ministry to explore and ultimately to link France’s possessions between the Niger River and the Guinea coast by treaties. Binger visited the main commercial centers of Kong and Bonduku, where he succeeded in making treaties with local rulers. While in Bonduku, he confirmed that its location was accurate on the Lannoy map (Paroisse 1889). His surveys also determined that the longitude of Kong was off by 1°24’ on the Lannoy map.

One of Binger’s greatest contributions to geographical knowledge was his discovery that the Kong Mountains did not exist. Throughout the nineteenth century that chain had been popularly viewed as a main barrier to commerce between the coast and the interior (Bassett and Porter 1991). His discovery opened a new north-south trade axis linking France’s possessions in the Sudan with the Ivory Coast (Binger 1890). For his contributions to geography, commerce, and empire building, the Paris Geographical Society awarded him its grand gold medal in 1890 (Duveyrier 1890).

The practice of indicating explorers’ itineraries on maps suggested possible routes of expansion. Whether they were merchants or military men, subsequent expeditions benefited from knowledge of the terrain traversed by previous explorers. For example, the conquest of the Mossi kingdom of Wagadugu by French military forces in 1896 was made possible by Binger’s sketch map of the royal center of Wagadugu (Binger 1892). This map showed the residence of the Moro Naba in relation to the mosque, the market area, and other compounds. Such locational information was useful to French troops in their search for the ruler’s compound. Numerous references to Binger’s 1890 map are also found in reports from military commanders of the French Sudan. This map was frequently cited by Colonel Trentinian in his discussion of the movements of Samori’s forces in present-day northern Ivory Coast. “The Circle Commander of Bougouni states that the information he has gathered points to the presence of Samori’s Sofa’s troops near Tiemou [Kiemou on Binger’s map]. . . . These troops commanded by Koro Bilali and
Kommadi Keleba have had their communications with Samori cut by the Bambaras of Tagouno [Binger’s map]” (ANSOM S.G. Soudan I, d. 9).

The frequency with which maps were updated or replaced testifies to their great commercial and strategic values. The eastern sections of Monteil’s map of the western Sudan were considered outdated a year after its printing (ANSOM S.G. Sénégal IV, d. 89). Rather than completely redo Monteil’s map, J. Vallière (1887) saved time and money by using the same scale of 1:750,000 and by attaching his revisions to the parts of Monteil’s map that were thought to be accurate. Vallière’s map itself was outdated a year after issue. In 1888 Gallieni requested a new map be made showing “the importance of our latest geographical conquests . . . [to] our successors [who] will need to have the information that we have so painfully gathered, especially if, since it is not in doubt, they must continue the colonial work undertaken in the Sudan” (ANSOM S.G. Sénégal IV, d. 92). A 20-sheet map of the western Sudan by Capt. Fortin, Administrator Estrabou, and Lt. Famin superseded Vallière’s map and became the “largest and most complete document which has yet to appear on these regions” (Gallieni 1889, 165).

On the diplomatic front, maps produced by surveyors formed part of the documentary evidence needed to claim protectorates by the procedures agreed to at the Berlin Conference. Topographers’ maps were annexed to the agreements between France and Portugal that established the extent of each other’s claims in western and equatorial Africa (Delavaud 1886). Surveyors also facilitated the settlement of European colonists. A passage by French colonial administrator C. Bour (1886, 433-434) succinctly stated this relationship:

Topography greatly contributes to colonization by the practical knowledge it provides of new countries with which our national commerce can establish relations; the services that it renders to new colonists are immense: whether it concerns the location of settlements, the use of water courses, or the building of roads. Future immigrants must arrive with sufficient topographic and geographic baggage to allow them to devote themselves either to commerce or to the exploitation of the natural riches of the country under the most advantageous conditions.

Finally, by indicating the nature and location of natural resources and indigenous economic activities, maps highlighted the potential benefits to be gained from trade and ultimately colonization. A decorative map of Africa in an atlas by Alexandre Vuillemin (1858) is rich in visual and textual information on commercial potential of the continent (Fig. 3). The border panels display indigenous markets and trade goods, economically useful plants, and detailed lists of exports, important minerals, and demographic information. The locations of mines, trading centers, forts, and European colonies are also noted on the map. Map readers can only be impressed by the apparent wealth of Africa. Abolitionists used such information when they lobbied for the expansion of commerce as an alternative to the slave trade. Indeed, the
notion that commerce would benefit Africans and Europeans alike became the new ideological basis for expanding European trade with Africa (Freund 1984, 112-117). With its emphasis on the commercial appeal of Africa Vuillemin’s map expressed both the practical value of and the ideological justification for imperialism.

**Blank Spaces**

Large areas about which little was ostensibly known appeared as blank spaces on nineteenth-century maps. This convention was in keeping with the scientific tradition pioneered by Jean B. B. d’Anville, whose 1749 map of Africa is famous for its extensive blank spaces. His commitment to depicting only those facts that could be verified is commonly cited as a watershed in scientific cartography. Before d’Anville, unknown regions were filled in with animals, imaginary mountains, large and flamboyant lettering, and descriptive texts. The boundaries of African kingdoms or states were precisely drawn despite being based on hearsay and outdated sources (Walckenaer 1821, 220). In the name of scientific accuracy such decorative and fictitious features were eliminated and replaced by blank spaces on d’Anville’s map. The blank spaces on Rennell’s map (Fig. 1) are evidence that he too adhered to this cartographic principle. It gives an aura of authority to the map and makes the map reader believe in the information that is shown.

Use of blank spaces also resulted from disregard of indigenous geographical knowledge and from attempts by Europeans to keep their knowledge...
secret. The principle that only verifiable facts should be depicted on maps ultimately came to mean that only European or European-trained explorers were reliable informants. The observations of Africans were of interest but were generally rejected on the Eurocentric grounds that they were unreliable. The debate over the course of the Niger River is illustrative.

Most mapmakers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries showed the Niger draining into a large interior lake in the vicinity of Lake Chad. The German geographer C. G. Reichard hypothesized in 1803 that the river emptied into the Gulf of Benin, a view also held by the British geographer James MacQueen. Others thought the Niger was connected to the Nile River or the Congo River or flowed underneath the Sahara to empty into the Gulf of Sidra on the Mediterranean coast. In a lengthy review of the account of the journey of Dixon Denham, Hugh Clapperton, and Walter Oudney (1826) from Tripoli to Sokoto, MacQueen (1826) believed he found new evidence to support his thesis about the mouth of the Niger. Notably, he referred to an Arabic manuscript written by Sultan Bello on the history and geography of the interior of Africa that Clapperton had obtained during his stay in Sokoto. The manuscript described the Niger, or Quorra, River as the main trade route between Sokoto and the coast. In Clapperton’s presence the sultan drew the course of the river in sand to show that it entered the gulf. However, on the map attached to the manuscript, the terminus of the Niger was not indicated. Contrary to Reichard’s and MacQueen’s thesis the river appears to flow in an easterly direction (Fig. 4). MacQueen (1826, 702) dismissed the map as a “rude representation . . . sufficient to convince us of [Sultan Bello’s] inaccuracy as a geographer, and of his ignorance of the grand features of African geography, and the course and terminations of the great African rivers beyond the immediate sphere of his own observation.” These were harsh words from an armchair geographer whose maps were filled with imaginary mountains (MacQueen 1821).

Such views were not shared by all Europeans. Nineteenth-century explorers commonly requested Africans to sketch maps of unknown areas on the ground. Many of those maps were highly regarded for their accuracy (Bassett forthcoming). Heinrich Barth (1859, vol. 3, 138) studied Bello’s map and geographical writing before embarking on his famous exploration of North and Central Africa. The French geographer Elisée Reclus (1887, 600) valued Bello’s map for its historical geography and included a variant of it in his monumental world geography.

MacQueen’s view was typical, though, of the Eurocentric mind that unabashedly stated, “Till a European, however, ascertain all these points from ocular demonstration, and with scientific precision, the public mind will not be satisfied on these important topics” (MacQueen 1826, 705). Unwilling to accept indigenous sources, European mapmakers showed areas unknown to them as blank spaces.

Even when areas were known to Europeans, the knowledge was often kept secret for strategic and commercial reasons (Kimble 1933; Harley 1988b).
The importance of geographical knowledge for empire building and trade is obvious. Maps, charts, and nautical logbooks were viewed by European rulers as secret documents whose unauthorized publication was punishable. Attempts to restrict dissemination of new geographical knowledge, though not always successful, helped to perpetuate European geographical ignorance of West Africa. For example, MacQueen (1826, 696) suggested that the course of the Niger River was probably known to some Europeans before the discovery of its outlet in 1830.

Evidence from the late nineteenth century indicates that map readers interpreted blank spaces as areas open for exploration and ultimately colonization. Rather than interpreting them as the limits of knowledge of African geography, as was the case on d’Anville’s map, imperialists presumed that the empty spaces were vacant and awaiting colonists (Delavaud 1887, 126). The silence desocialized space, and the map became a justification to appropriate territory (Harley 1988b, 70). In the apparent absence of human habitation and signs of indigenous territorial control, the public might be more willing to support imperialist ventures overseas.

During the great scramble for Africa in the late nineteenth century, leading figures in the French colonial movement dreamed of claiming blank
areas for the glory of France. The empty spaces on Lannoy’s maps were known to have excited the renowned French imperialists Auguste Terrier and Harry Alis, who founded the Comité de l’Afrique Française, an organization that promoted French overseas expansion. Terrier passionately “looked forward to filling in the ‘blanks’ of this map, to extend and to draw more precisely the rose color which first indicated French ‘zones of influence,’ and next the possessions recognized as belonging to our country” (Martonne 1936, 8). With that aggressive purpose, Binger’s expedition was described in terms mixing cartographic and militaristic rhetoric: “One of the largest blank spaces remaining on the map of Africa is to find itself attacked by the lines of Captain Binger’s march, whose journey henceforth ranks among the most remarkable to be undertaken in Africa” (Lesseps 1889, 211). Although the result of the expeditions might only lead to “a red line on a big white area on the map” (Supan 1888, 186), another consequence, as in Binger’s case, was annexation of vast areas in Africa by European governments. That potential for territorial expansion and its attendant glories is what made blank spaces on maps so appealing to imperialists.

**Claiming Lands with Lines and Color**

Cartographic use of color and boundary lines furthered the aims of empire builders by claiming lands not yet effectively controlled by Europeans. In March 1890 the Parisian daily *Le Temps* published a special supplement devoted to the Binger expedition. Across the top of the first page a map of the western Sudan showed the areas explored by Binger. A hachured line indicated a French zone of influence extending from the Black Volta to Burrum. A diplomatic row ensued (Kanya-Forstner 1969, 157–158):

> When a copy [of the map] reached Berlin, the German Government immediately protested against the apparent violation of the Anglo-German Neutrality Agreement of 1887 and asked for more precise information about the eastern limits of the French sphere. This demand aroused great anxiety at the Quai d’Orsay. Desbuissons, the Ministry’s geographer, saw it as proof of secret German designs on Wagadugu and Timbuktu, and he urged the immediate negotiation of new treaties to protect French rights on the Niger Bend. Although he accepted the Burrum line as an accurate representation of French aspirations, he added ruefully that they had no diplomatic substance without treaties to support them. Accordingly, he suggested a cautiously worded reply which would not reveal the actual weakness of the French position.

> Five years earlier the French geographer Henri Duveyrier had expressed his concern about the apparent legitimation of Spanish territorial claims south of Cape Blanc on a new map of Africa drawn by the German cartographer Hermann Habenicht (1885). Duveyrier (1885, 518) noted that the
coloring for Spanish claims covered the entire cape and extended along the eastern coast of Greyhound Bay. He cited a number of patented letters and treaties dating from the seventeenth century to demonstrate that the area was a French possession. Habenicht’s coloring was based on a notice and a map published in a Spanish geographical journal by a Spanish officer who had explored the coastal area in 1884 for the king of Spain (Bonelli 1885). Duveyrier asserted that the Spanish article was unofficial and should not become the basis for “inexact notions of the situation.” The Paris Geographical Society sent a copy of Duveyrier’s text to the ministers of Foreign Affairs and the Marine to appraise them of the situation.

The Cape Blanc incident was not an isolated case. European territorial claims along the West African coast were often weak and usually contested. France, Great Britain, Spain, and Germany disagreed over a number of areas around the Bight of Biafra, and each government used its own maps to claim disputed lands. “Depending on whether they are published in Paris, Madrid or Berlin, the maps show the same territory marked in different colors” (Maunoir 1886, 128).

Another map with lines and colors to promote empire building was published in 1890 by Georges Rolland with the imperious title “L’Afrique française: Ce qu’elle est—Ce qu’elle doit être” (Fig. 5). The purpose of the map was to show the strategic value of a trans-Saharan railroad, which was never constructed. However, many French imperialists envisioned the artery linking the French northern African colonies with the Sudan so that France could consolidate its claims to a vast African empire. The map is of interest because it anticipates more than reflects that empire (Harley 1988a, 282). According to the map’s legend, the dark-shaded area represents “French possessions, countries under our protectorate, and zones of influence: recognized or what must be considered to be acquired.” The light-shaded area encompasses “regions that must be considered as entering into our sphere of influence.”

The map promoted colonialism in various ways. First, to garner more support for colonial ventures, it depicted as French territory that France did not effectively control—for example, Samori’s empire, which France claimed to be under its protection (Hargreaves 1963, 340). Second, it implied that neighboring territories, the light-shaded area, would inevitably become part of the French empire. The message was that the opportunity to enlarge the empire by constructing the trans-Saharan railroad should not be lost. Third, it lobbied for the railroad by showing how it would consolidate France’s territorial claims by linking Algeria and the Sudan. Fourth, the blanks on the map insidiously facilitated the process of colonial expansion. By omitting African states and ethnic groups from the St. Louis-Timbuktu-Kong triangle the map desocialized space to the detriment of the inhabitants. The prevalence of blank spaces, despite European knowledge of the political geography of the area, suggested that the region was open for colonialization. Finally,
the imperial message was highlighted in the title: French Africa: what it is—what it should be.

**Legitimating European Conquest**

Maps not only promoted empire building but also sanctioned and even celebrated its progress. An extensive merchant marine network secured by a strong navy was vital to the expansion of European commercial and political hegemony during the nineteenth century (Christopher 1988). Images on maps of naval ships, blazing cannons, coastal forts, soldiers, and cargo vessels depict the capacity of imperialist states to project their power far from home. The cartouche on the 1802 map of Africa by Aaron Arrowsmith illustrates
this point (Fig. 6). The scene is dominated by an enormous anthropomorphized lion that symbolizes the United Kingdom. It is an imperial figure capable of both ferocity and gentleness. The furrowed eyebrows and the pensive look of the lion suggest a wise, paternalistic figure. It stretches a protective, possessive paw over the medallion-shaped title panel on which Africa is inscribed.
Africa appears to be divided into two parts. On the left side is North Africa, especially ancient Egypt, epitomized by the pyramid, obelisk, and pharaonic mummy. The blazing cannon and sailing ship beyond the billowing smoke represent the supremacy of the British navy: a British fleet, under Admiral Lord Nelson's command, had destroyed a French fleet at the Battle of the Nile during Napoleon Bonaparte's 1798–1801 effort to occupy Egypt. Anglo-French rivalry in that region focused on control of the Red Sea trade route to India. One of Napoleon's objectives in invading Egypt was to strike at British economic interests by controlling the isthmus and the Gulf of Suez (Vatikiotis 1991, 33). The decline of Ottoman rule in Egypt is symbolized below the medallion by the broken cutlass, turban, and fallen staff.

On the right side of the cartouche is sub-Saharan Africa, epitomized by an elephant and an African figure on bended knee looking toward the lion. The posture suggests a supplicant seeking protection from slave traders. Although the antislavery movement in Great Britain was at a low point in 1800, most members of the African Association, to whom Arrowsmith's map was dedicated, were prominent abolitionists (Hallett 1965, 195, 350). They actively lobbied the government to outlaw slavery by British subjects and to subsidize the expansion of legitimate commerce. One plan favored by the association was to found a colony on the Niger River so that British merchants could control the highly prized gold trade and to develop new markets in the interior. At the association's general meeting in May 1799, Joseph Banks argued that it was important to act quickly: "If this Country delays much longer to possess themselves of the Treasuries laid open to them by the exertions of this Association, some Rival Nation will take possession of the banks of the Joliba [Niger] and assert by arms the right of Prior possession" (Hallett 1965, 245). The capture of Gorée Island from the French in 1800 and the public financing of Mungo Park's second, ill-fated expedition to the Niger in 1805 suggest that the British government shared some of the association's concerns.

The rising sun in the background of the cartouche evokes the dawn of modern imperialism in Africa advocated by the African Association. The cartouche and the map as a whole can be interpreted as a call for a more aggressive colonial policy on the part of the British government. Cartographers like Arrowsmith were effectively opening Africa in both practical and ideological ways for Europe to extend its imperial reach.

A map of western Africa (Fig. 7) includes four vignettes that sanction empire building. The landscape is dominated by sailing ships and fortified factories surmounted by European flags. The factories are imposing symbols of European economic and military might. The European vessels dwarf the indigenous ones, an image of the strength of the merchant marine. The vignette of Christianborg Castle relates an episode in Great Britain's expanding territorial control over the Gold Coast. In 1850 the British government purchased the West African possessions of Denmark, which included that castle. Because of its better health conditions, Christianborg Castle re-
placed Cape Coast Castle as the British administrative center on the coast. That acquisition of new trading stations and the establishment of administrative capitals were essential to expansion of the empire. By illustrating those new developments the map paid tribute to British success in creating a new territorial status quo in West Africa.

The depiction of victorious French soldiers on the 1845 map of Africa by Victor Levasseur legitimates France’s conquest under the ideological banner of the civilizing mission (Fig. 8). The eye is drawn to the standing French soldier showing a seated Arab a map of Africa. Two well-dressed Arabs, one standing and the other mounted, are portrayed sympathetically as they observe the scene. It is a moment of instruction, of imparting knowledge to noble but inferior subjects. The superior foreigner is shown as possessing greater knowledge of the continent than do its inhabitants. The map, held by the officer, also symbolizes French power to civilize through conquest. The power to map is synonymous with the power to delimit, to control, and to develop territory. This theme of civilization through conquest is suggested in the text inscribed on the monument that towers over the scene: “Civilization brought by European peoples to every corner of this burning land with a luxuriant vegetation will enable one to appreciate its true worth some day.” In the lower background, a group of victorious soldiers carry the French flag. One of them is holding the hand of a defeated Arab, a humanitarian gesture in keeping with France’s view of itself as a liberator of all peoples subject to despotic rulers. Under the French flag liberty would overcome
Fig. 8—Afrique (1:43,000,000). Source: Levasseur 1845.
tyranny; knowledge would prevail over ignorance, and trade would stimulate stagnant economies. The port of Algiers depicted in the vignette appears as the gateway to both freedom and free trade, linking civilization, commerce, and colonialism.

Surveying this scene from on high is “Mahomet holding the Coran, sitting on one of the monuments of this African soil where his religion is the most widespread.” The minarets of a mosque appear on a mountainside to his lower left. The text concludes: “Below, the children of France bring a glorious life to Algeria conquered by their arms of intelligence which must one day unite all nations.” In contrast with this rendering of French colonialism, the conquest of Algeria was marked by unmitigated violence against the population (Julien 1964, 177–200; Ruedy 1992, 50). The omission of any mention of those actions from Levasseur’s map underscores its ideological intent to legitimate French imperialist advances in Africa.

Topographical features reinforced the image of imperial power. The creation of the Kong Mountains as a major divide separating drainage basins in West Africa can be interpreted as an ethnocentric view of African geography. The empirical basis for such a mountain chain was extremely weak, but it was consonant with the popular geographical theory of Philippe Buache that “every drainage divide is necessarily a mountain chain” (Broc 1969, 58). Buache was the first geographer to be admitted to the French Royal Academy of Sciences, and from 1729 to 1773 he held the prestigious position of the King’s Geographer. In 1752 he published a famous essay in which he introduced the theory that the earth was divided into drainage basins by continuous mountain chains that encircled the globe (Buache 1752). Like his contemporary the naturalist Count Buffon, Buache sought to systematize and to build typologies of the physical features of the earth. It meant that one could determine the orientation of mountains if the general course of a river was known. The simplicity and comprehensiveness of the theory were attractive to geographers at a time when the earth’s natural features were generally believed to be chaotically arranged (Drayperon 1887).

Reclus (1887, 404) suggested that Rennell, like other prominent geographers of his day, may have been influenced by Buache’s theory. Rennell contended that the Niger River flowed in a west-east direction and emptied into an interior delta in the general vicinity of Lake Chad. His theory that the Kong Mountains were a major divide separating streams flowing into the Niger basin from those emptying into the Gulf of Guinea was congruent with the predictive system of Buache. On one map illustrating Buache’s thesis, an east-west-trending mountain range stretches across West Africa where the Kong Mountains were later to appear on Rennell’s map.

**The Authority of Maps**

Images of rising suns, paternalistic figures, commercial and military prowess, and territorial control all celebrated a new age of European empire.
building. That new order and authority were symbolized by the reorganization of African space on maps. Throughout the nineteenth century cartographers progressively filled in the blank spaces, drew new boundaries, and engraved new place-names on maps. By presenting new, improved, and corrected maps of Africa cartographers helped to shape and legitimate the process of imperialist expansion. The geographical societies recognized those contributions and bestowed honors on persons who contributed most to advancing European access to and control of African resources.

The imperial messages communicated by cartographers possessed an authoritative power that was unique to their craft. That authority was based on the assumption of map readers that they were viewing objective and accurate representations of reality. Map readers believed that cartographers were applying scientific principles in their work and were devoted to producing a true map (Harley 1989, 4–5). Such widely accepted views of map-making provided cartographers with a readership that generally believed what it saw.

When delegates to the Berlin Conference drew lines on maps, they were exercising that authoritative power. Claiming territory with a stroke of a pen implied that maps possessed an authority which made such claims possible. Maps were used as both instruments and representations of imperial power in West Africa during the nineteenth century. Like other forms of colonial discourse, such as speeches, books, and sermons, maps promoted the appropriation of African space under the rhetoric of commerce and civilization. Maps facilitated conquest by their accuracy and selective content. The omission of African peoples and politics and the depiction of European settlements and place-names were central to empire building. More than a mere reflection of conquest, maps helped to produce empire by enabling and legitimating the process of colonization.

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