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Cartographies of Knowledge: African Maps, Navigators, and Geographic Thought

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Introduction

This book argues that African peoples have not merely appeared on maps; they have made them, debated them, and lived by them. From river pilots and caravan leaders to scholars, artisans, and city planners, Africans have long produced, curated, and contested geographic knowledge. Their maps—some inscribed on paper, others embodied in song, memory boards, or ritual paths—guided trade and pilgrimage, enabled warfare and diplomacy, and anchored administrations both indigenous and imperial. By tracing these cartographies from antiquity to the digital present, we aim to reposition Africa from an object of mapping to a subject that maps.

To do so, we broaden what counts as a “map.” Rather than privileging only gridded projections and printed atlases, we attend to itineraries, mental charts, cosmograms, and devices that encode spatial relations without conforming to European conventions. This expanded lens brings into focus coastal star paths and monsoon knowledge along the Swahili littoral, the networks of wells that structure Saharan caravans, and riverine expertise on the Niger, Congo, and Zambezi. It also encompasses sacred geographies—shrines, graveyards, and pilgrimage circuits—through which communities articulate belonging, power, and obligation.

Islamic scholarship is central to this story. Across North, West, and East Africa, Arabic-language geographies, legal opinions, and travelogues circulated with scholars, merchants, and pilgrims, embedding African places within transregional worlds that stretched to the Maghrib, the Hijaz, and beyond. Manuscript traditions, urban madrasas, and scholarly lineages produced “paper worlds” that complemented oral and practical mappings. These literate cartographies did not merely mirror the landscape; they mediated political authority, taxation, and jurisprudence, and they framed debates over the ethics of travel, trade, and war.

European expansion did not erase these geographies; it collided with, appropriated, and sometimes depended on them. Pilots and porters supplied route knowledge to imperial expeditions; surveyors triangulated over trails already stitched together by pastoralists and traders; colonial administrators converted landscapes of use into cadastral parcels and boundary lines. Mapping here functioned as an instrument of power—fixing borders, extracting resources, and disciplining populations—yet it also generated counter-maps. African intellectuals, chiefs, activists, and artists redrew territories, asserted sovereignty, and critiqued the violence hidden in neat lines.

The book also follows maps into war rooms and marketplaces. Campaign plans and intelligence maps shaped conflicts from the late nineteenth century through the world wars; route knowledge and coastal charts enabled slaving, then abolitionist patrols;

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mineral surveys and aerial photographs reorganized economies around extraction. In towns and cities, urban plans layered colonial rationalities onto older logics of settlement, while postcolonial governments and professionals reworked these plans to manage growth, informality, and risk. Throughout, maps entangle with administration: they justify road placement, school siting, taxation, conservation, and humanitarian response.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, new tools—from satellite imagery to GPS-enabled phones, drones, and open data platforms—have democratized certain forms of mapping while introducing fresh asymmetries. Community mapping projects render visible pastoral corridors, fishing grounds, and informal neighborhoods. At the same time, proprietary platforms and extractive data economies reconfigure who can see and be seen. The digital turn raises questions about privacy, participation, and the persistence of colonial coordinates in contemporary datasets.

Methodologically, this study triangulates across archives, oral histories, ethnography, and material culture. It reads maps alongside the practices that produce and use them, attentive to the social lives of cartographic objects: who drew them, for whom, and to what ends. It pairs regional chapters with thematic ones, avoiding a single teleology of progress from “pre-modern” to “modern.” Instead, it foregrounds coexisting cartographic regimes and the exchanges—sometimes cooperative, often conflictual—through which they interact.

Cartographies of Knowledge invites readers to see Africa’s geographies not as blank spaces awaiting inscription but as dense palimpsests of skill, memory, and aspiration. By reframing maps as instruments of power and cultural exchange, we hope to illuminate how spatial knowledge has shaped trade, warfare, and administration—and how it continues to organize everyday life. The chapters that follow assemble a mosaic of practices and visions, offering not a definitive atlas but a set of pathways for reimagining what a map is and what it can do.

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CHAPTER ONE: Landscapes of Knowing: Early African Mappings Before the Map

Long before Europeans printed gridded charts on vellum, people across Africa were making and using maps. Not all of them looked like the maps we recognize today. Some were scratched into earth and stone, others woven into textiles, performed in movement, or spoken in verse. They were not attempts to mimic a bird's-eye view but to hold knowledge of places in ways that mattered to daily life. In many settings, mapping was an everyday act. Travelers kept mental inventories of springs and shade, farmers read the contours of soil and slope, hunters followed paths encoded in story, and elders remembered the order of stones that marked a lineage's claim. These practices did not require the concept of a "map" to be powerful. They were, in effect, maps in action.

Consider the carved stone alignments and cairns that still punctuate landscapes from the highlands of Ethiopia to the rock-strewn plains of the Sahara. In precolonial societies, piles of stones were not just landmarks; they were mnemonics. A traveler approaching a pass might set a stone to mark a spring's reliability in the dry season, or a pastoralist might arrange a small cairn to signal the last grazing stand before a salt pan. Communities read these features as texts of terrain. The cairns did not represent space in the manner of a chart, but they structured movement and memory, and they helped negotiate rights of passage. Over generations, the stones accumulated, becoming a slow, collective cartography. Their authority lay not in precision but in persistence.

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In the Sahel and Sahara, the ground itself often served as a drawing board. Caravan leaders and scouts sketched routes in the sand, narrating turns and distances with gestures and terms that emphasized cues visible to the foot-bound traveler—dune shape, the angle of the sun, the pattern of pebbles underfoot. When the wind erased these marks, they were not lost; they lived in the speech of guides and the cadence of marching songs. The sand was a temporary medium, but its use suited a landscape of shifting tracks. The point was not to fix a route permanently but to rehearse it often enough that it could be reproduced under new conditions. By the time a traveler reached the next well, the route had become an embodied script.

Along the coasts of the Indian Ocean and Red Sea, communities developed techniques for reading water and sky that doubled as spatial maps. Swahili and Somali sailors learned the rhythm of monsoon winds, the feel of currents against the hull, and the signs of reefs from subtle changes in wave patterns. The sea was not a blank surface; it was a layered text of sounds, temperatures, and smells. These navigators did not

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need a chart to place themselves, yet they also made charts when useful. In ports like Lamu and Mogadishu, skilled pilots could translate their mental atlases into spoken instructions, guiding vessels through channels marked by birds, coastal vegetation, and the color of water at particular tides. Their knowledge was both portable and precise.

On the Great Lakes of East Africa, dugout canoe pilots held detailed understandings of lake hydrography. They knew the location of submerged rocks, the seasonal shifts in currents, and the behavior of storms. The Kagera River, Lake Victoria’s sources, and the complex system of channels around islands were all navigated through oral instructions that described distances in paddling time rather than linear measure. To a European eye, these might not look like maps, but to a Lugandan or Haya sailor, they were a reliable atlas. The lake’s “map” was a repertoire of cues: a bend in the shoreline, a particular sandbar, the way wind whistled through a grove of papyrus. It was an atlas learned by feel as much as by sight.

In the interior, the logic of mapping frequently favored temporal and experiential measures. Among the Oromo, for instance, movement was often described in gadaa cycles and in terms of grazing regimes and water availability across seasons. Paths were not simply lines on ground but schedules tied to ecological rhythms. A route that was impassable in one month might be ideal in another, and the “map” was as much a calendar as a spatial diagram. This integration of time and space made for resilient navigation in environments that shifted dramatically with rainfall and drought. It also meant that mapping was a social process, encoded in collective memory rather than individual memory alone.

Kinship and territory were often mapped through narrative and ritual. Among the Igbo, the concept of the “home” extended beyond households to include shrines, pathways, and the graves of ancestors. These places formed a topography of belonging, inscribed in story, song, and the choreography of festivals. When a community needed to reaffirm boundaries, they might reenact the routes taken by founding ancestors, literally walking the claim into being. This performative mapping was neither arbitrary nor static; it encoded legal memory and resource rights. A stranger entering the territory would be met with questions and guided along paths that made sense within this embodied atlas.

Maps in precolonial Africa often took durable physical forms as well. The sand drawing of the Luba people (lukasa) and the knot-recordings of the Kongo (telling nkisi) and other memory boards are frequently cited examples. The lukasa is a small wooden board fitted with beads, shells, and carved symbols that encode histories, genealogies, and the relationships between places. While it is not a map in the Euclidean sense, it is a spatial device: it arranges concepts in positions that are read like directions, with narrative acting as the compass. The memory board served as a portable archive that could be consulted during council meetings or ceremonial events, allowing elders to

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“point” to locations within a shared symbolic landscape.

These memory objects were not limited to the Congo region. In West Africa, divination trays and boards among Yoruba and Akan practitioners sometimes incorporated spatial references related to towns, rivers, and markets. The arrangement of symbols could stand for routes of trade or networks of political allegiance. While these objects were primarily ritual technologies, they doubled as geographic references when the situation demanded. The genius of such devices was their ability to fold multiple kinds of knowledge—historical, moral, spatial—into a single medium. They made it possible to hold a conversation about place without a single coordinate line.

Across the savannas and forests, settlement planning often reflected mapping logic embedded in material culture. Compound houses and royal architecture in the Sahel, such as the earth-and-timber structures of the Mossi and the Dogon, organized space around principles that were both cosmological and practical. The orientation of courtyards, the placement of granaries, and the layout of avenues aligned with cardinal directions, seasonal sun paths, and social hierarchies. This built environment functioned as a large-scale, resident map of values and priorities. To walk through such a town was to move through a diagram of how the world was understood, with every threshold marking a different scale of relation.

In regions with iron production, furnaces and slag heaps themselves became landmarks. The patterning of extraction and smelting sites in places like Tanzania’s Mwanza region or the Ruwenzori foothills created zones of activity that were remembered as much as they were seen. Travelers learned to associate certain hills with particular workshops and trade in iron tools. Over centuries, the geography of production grew into a mental map of resource networks. This map was dynamic: new furnaces appeared, old ones cooled, and routes shifted accordingly. Its authority derived from repeated visits and exchanges, not from an official survey.

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Markets offered another template for mapping. The weekly cycle of market days in many African regions created temporal geographies that knitted distant villages into a common economic space. A farmer in northern Ghana might plan movement not by distance but by the market calendar, traveling to a different town on each day of the week. The resulting network of routes was a map of consumption and supply, often overlaid with language zones and kin ties. When colonial authorities later standardized trade days, they were grafting their own grids onto an existing pattern. The older rhythm persisted in the memory of elders, who could recite which market lay along which path at which hour.

Oral cartographies were especially adept at encoding hazard and safety. Along the coasts, songs and stories marked rip currents, sandbars, and safe landing points. In the Sahara, caravan tales flagged mirage zones and places where wind directions shifted unpredictably. This knowledge had consequences for survival. The map was in

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the telling: a well was not just a point of water but a node in a story of scarcity and endurance. By embedding geographic facts in narrative structure—plot, character, metaphor—communities made them easier to remember and transmit across generations. The humor, drama, and poetics of these tales were not ornament; they were mnemonic devices.

Religious and ritual topographies formed yet another layer. In many traditions, the placement of shrines, burial grounds, and sacred groves made a map of spiritual authority. Pilgrimage routes linked these nodes, sometimes crossing political boundaries. The itineraries were not random; they traced mythic paths, old trade lines, and ecological corridors. To walk a pilgrimage was to move through a landscape saturated with meaning, where each stopping place recalled an ancestor, an event, or a covenant. When new religions arrived—whether Islam or Christianity—they were integrated by mapping their institutions onto these older circuits, locating mosques and churches at familiar nodes of significance.

Counting and measuring in precolonial African contexts rarely relied on standardized units, but that did not mean they lacked rigor. Distances were often reckoned in time—how long it took to walk or paddle from one point to another. Volumes were measured by container types and gestures; area by the labor required to clear or harvest. These were practical metrics, grounded in bodily experience. When mapping a field system, a community might use the number of hoe handles or seed baskets as a reference. The map was not external to the body; it was calibrated to it. This made mapping accessible and adaptable across different scales of activity.

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In regions where textile production flourished, patterned cloths sometimes encoded spatial or social relationships. Kente and other woven textiles of West Africa, for instance, arrange motifs in ways that signal lineages, events, and places. The cloth becomes a portable diagram of belonging. While not maps in the sense of routes, these fabrics map networks of identity that have spatial implications. Wearing a particular cloth could announce origin, allegiance, or a connection to a specific riverine or forest community. The textile serves as a visual shorthand for a set of geographic relationships known to those who can read the pattern.

Another form of mapping occurred through animal management. Pastoralists across East Africa, the Sahel, and the Horn followed seasonal grazing circuits that required precise knowledge of pasture quality, water availability, and disease risk. The routes were not fixed; they were negotiated each year through discussions among herders, based on rainfall reports and news from distant camps. The map was the annual movement itself, written onto the land by hooves and feet. To an outsider, it might look like wandering; to participants, it was a highly structured itinerary guided by ecological indicators and social contracts. These circuits were, in effect, a living atlas.

In the forest zones of Central and West Africa, hunters and foragers built detailed

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mental charts of plant communities, animal trails, and microclimates. This knowledge was often encoded in stories and songs that described not just locations but relationships among species. A hunter moving through the Congo rainforest did not rely on lines drawn on paper but on a web of cues: the smell of certain lianas, the call of particular birds, the texture of soil at the foot of a given tree. This was a map perceived through the senses, updated with every expedition. Its accuracy was tested by success: a good return from the forest was proof that the map in the mind matched the world outside.

In regions with complex political systems, territorial claims were frequently mapped through ritual performance and physical markers. In the kingdom of Kongo, for instance, boundary disputes might be resolved by walking the border while reciting the names of streams, hills, and historical events. The act of walking and speaking the landscape made the border real to participants. Similar practices are known among the Shona and the Luba, where oral histories carried the contours of authority across generations. The map was a script, performed and remembered. This did not prevent conflict, but it offered a shared framework for negotiation.

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Merchants in the Great Lakes region used a hybrid of oral and material mapping. They kept beads and shells as ledgers that could represent distances, debts, and destinations. A string of beads might encode a route: each bead a stage, each color a type of terrain or a trading partner. While this was primarily an accounting tool, it also stood as a mnemonic for the journey. Such practices demonstrate how mapping often intersected with other forms of record-keeping, blurring the line between itinerary and inventory. The map was not separate from commerce; it was embedded in its tools.

Along the southern African coast, Khoisan communities are known to have used notations in rock art that some scholars interpret as maps of the cosmos and local geography. The placement of animals, human figures, and geometric signs sometimes aligns with prominent landscape features, suggesting a symbolic mapping of resources and mythic routes. While debates continue about interpretation, the art clearly encodes relationships between people, animals, and place. It is not a map in the modern sense, but it is a cartographic act: an attempt to render the world intelligible through images.

In the Horn of Africa, ge’ez script and later Arabic inscriptions occasionally annotated landscapes with notes about wells, churches, and trade paths. These textual markings, whether carved on stone or written on parchment, served as prompts for travelers and as records for communities. They were not atlases, but they were map-like in their intent to fix spatial information. The inscriptions sometimes included directions and distances, mixing spiritual exhortation with practical guidance. This blending of genres is characteristic of many African cartographic practices: the map was rarely a standalone object; it was part of a larger system of knowledge.

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Pottery and other material artifacts also carried spatial meaning. The decoration on pots could signify riverine or savanna origins, and the distribution of ceramic styles across regions mirrored patterns of exchange and movement. Archaeologists use these distributions to reconstruct networks, but for local communities, the pot in hand was a reminder of routes and relationships. The vessel's form and ornament made a small map of social geography, readable to those who knew the codes. In this way, everyday objects acted as subtle cartographic instruments.

There is also evidence that some communities used astronomical cues to anchor spatial understanding. Observations of the rising and setting of certain stars, the paths of the moon, and the solstice sun were woven into calendars that guided travel and agricultural cycles. While this knowledge was often ritualized, it had practical applications: it told people when to move, where to go, and how to time their journeys. The sky became a portable grid, a map written in light. Its advantage was its constancy; its disadvantage was its need for interpretation. That interpretation was itself a skill, transmitted with care.

Maps are not only about how to get from one place to another; they are also about how to belong. In many African societies, initiation rites mapped the transition from childhood to adulthood onto a symbolic geography. The initiate's journey—often a physical movement from the village to a secluded place—was a map of transformation. Landmarks became metaphors; pathways stood for stages of learning. When the initiate returned, they carried a new understanding of space and social position. This mapping was hidden to outsiders but fundamental to the community's sense of order. It reminds us that cartography can be interior as well as exterior.

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In sum, early African mappings before the map were diverse, inventive, and well adapted to their environments. They prioritized what mattered to users: time, relation, safety, belonging, and access to resources. They were not driven by the pursuit of a single, universal scale, but by the need to navigate many scales—from the household to the region—efficiently. Their media ranged from earth and stone to cloth and story, and their durability lay in repetition and ritual. They were maps that carried knowledge without fixing it in a single, authoritative image. That does not make them less rigorous; it makes them differently rigorous.

To appreciate these cartographies, it helps to move beyond the assumption that the only real map is a picture of a place as seen from above. A map can be a string of beads, a song that counts distances, a walk that confirms a border, or a stone that marks a well. These forms may not fit the conventions of modern cartography, but they meet the core criterion of a map: they organize spatial knowledge for practical use. In the chapters that follow, we will trace how these early practices connect to later, more familiar cartographic traditions—Islamic geographies, coastal pilot books, colonial surveys—and how they persist, adapt, and sometimes resist the pressures of

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change. For now, it is enough to see that African geographies did not begin when outsiders drew them; they began with the everyday work of knowing where one was and how to move through the world.

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