



Activity – Maps and the Geographical Imagination

Geography is sometimes described as earth description. But the political geographers Joe Painter and Alex Jeffrey have noted that geography is less about *describing* the earth as if seen through a pair of binoculars, than about *writing* the earth.¹ Some mapmakers may produce a vision of what that they want to see or what they imagine rather than what is actually there before them. Maps, they show, are a crucial tool in 'earth-writing'.

Look at the BBC article 'Audio slideshow: Mapping Africa'
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-12675464>

This is a BBC audio slideshow called 'Mapping Africa', featuring maps from the Royal Geographical Society's collection.

- Why were these maps produced?
- What do these maps tell us about how people imagined and represented Africa?
- Can you identify any significant changes in the representation of Africa in these (or other) maps compared to modern day maps of Africa?
- Why are these important issues for geographers to consider?

Conclusions:

You might suggest that these maps of Africa became more accurate with further exploration and the use of better mapmaking techniques. But these maps are also important examples of the development of a geographical imagination – how people in, say, Britain began to think about the rest of the world, and their place in that world. In other words, they play an important part in the development of what we might term our geographical imagination. And that imagination shapes not only how we view the world but also how we interact with other people.

Beyond Geography...

If you are studying A-Level History, consider the survival of these sources. What do maps tell us about the people that made them?

¹ Joe Painter and Alex Jeffrey (2008) *Political Geography: An introduction to space and power* (London: Sage)