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'Unknown Parts'

– Kenneth Habeeb

"First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is." --Donovan

From the Sixteenth century, Italian, then Dutch and French, German, and English cartographers took their turns mapping the vast African continent, freely borrowing from each other; only updating what they could, which was little – mostly river placement. Time passed, rife with the possibility of a fanciful creation out of whole cloth, and such a creation came to be in the form of the *Mountains of Kong*. The Mountains of Kong, and their counterparts to the east, the Mountains of the Moon were, along with the island of California, one of the most persistent cartographic fallacies ever put to paper.

Amazingly, good and trustworthy geographic and cultural knowledge of deepest and darkest Africa was scarce and hard to come by well into the 20th century. As with other unexplored areas of the globe, mapmakers have always "had the difficult task of translating imprecise description in words to locations on maps." ¹



Early African maps contain phantasmagoric creatures as well as elephants and giraffes; the colorful characters often being just artistic placeholders for the unknown. Those placeholders were eventually abandoned for unadorned map space. One of the first mapmakers to embrace the honesty of ignorance was Jean Baptiste d'Anville in the mid-18th century with his Kaart van Africa. It's likely that d' Anville felt the sting of Jonathan Swift's very recently written little poetic dig at maps of the day:

“So Geographers, in Afric-maps,
 With savage-pictures fill their gaps;
 And o'er unhabitable downs,
 Place elephants for want of towns.”

Another contemporary mapmaker, John Cary, penned the words, 'Unknown Parts' to explain his vast area of white space left for the African interior. And I have a circa 1820s Carte dell' Affrica by the

More information did finally arrive in the 18th and 19th centuries. Credible would be late in coming. Enter geographic creations named The Mountains of Kong and Mountains of the Moon, which would come to represent what fractional little had been seen and could be sleuthed out at that time. The fictional mountain chains were really only the most recent examples of placeholders for hard information.

Who deserves the credit for these prominent geographic artifacts? That is somewhat debatable, but their existence was 'corroborated' by a number of celebrated explorers, among them Rene Caillie, Hugh Clapperton, Richard Lander, and Mungo Park, all of whom not only claimed to see the mountains, but described them as being "lofty," or "blue," or made of "rugged granite," with elevations estimated as high as 14,000 ft.

Mungo Park's trek deep into the continent is central to the story.

"Seeing" the Mountains

In 1795, the *African Association*, a British club of geographers, scholars, politicians, humanitarians, and traders that had been founded to dispel the myths of the dark continent and shed light on some of its deeper secrets, found and hired a previously unheralded Scot by the name of Mungo Park to explore the interior. The *Association's* specific instructions were to chart the flow of the Niger River and attempt to reach the mysterious city of Timbuktu, which Europeans then believed held the wealth of successive kings. Mungo Park, for his part, hoped to attain fame in a history-making expedition, like navigator Captain James Cook before him in an epic world voyage. ²

Park wasn't the first to explore central Africa, but his predecessors had all failed before him - a number of them in fact perishing in the attempt.

The African Association introduced Park to James Rennell, a leading geographer of the period, and one of its members. Rennell was determined to update the status-quo d'Anville map of Africa. After learning of Park's itinerary, he set down some 'geographic demands' for Park in advance. Rennell's 'demands' for information were the 18th-century equivalent of NASA scientists laying out a moon-landing

protocol for Collins, Aldrin, and Armstrong. Mungo Park's courageous undertaking might be considered somewhat less important than a moon landing, but it was probably no less scary in its time. There were no inoculations for any of a number of infectious diseases endemic to the treacherous terrain, such as Cholera, Typhoid, Yellow Fever, Meningitis, and Malaria. In fact, Park did not escape the Malaria, and after nearly dying of it there, he staggered through the rest of his long trek, only to deal with natives who were not always friendly. Park was accosted a number of times, and in the final robbery of this harrowing trip, he was spared only his hat and the clothes he was wearing. ³

An exhausting three years later, Mungo Park made it back to England. ⁴

He returned a celebrity, albeit without any news of Timbuktu, because he did not reach it, but he certainly had tales to tell. Meanwhile, James Rennell had been working with the *Association* to draw up his map of Africa when Park returned. The *Association*, the world's first geographical society, could only make available to Rennell years of accumulated second-hand information, and as it turned out, Park was not able to provide the first hand data that Rennell needed. Mungo Park was the first European to traverse the middle part of the Niger River, and he came back with compass readings for Rennell that showed that the Niger flowed from west to east, but not a lot more. He and Rennell were at best only able to confirm the opinion of ancient geographers Pliny, Herodotus, and Ptolemy about the direction of the river.

So, with what new information he was given, Rennell had to make a judgment call as to the Niger's exact placement, and that's when things go sideways. Park reported seeing a range of mountains running east to west on the horizon to the south of the Niger, within Africa's Kong empire. Appropriately, he named the range the Mountains of Kong. The placement of the mountains supported Rennell's reasoning that the Niger River would not be able to flow through such a barrier (unless it could go uphill), explaining why it was not seen by explorers below a certain latitude. Eventually, Rennell took the less than satisfactory sum total of what he had, and published his *Map Shewing the Progress of Discovery & Improvement in the Geography of North Africa*, including Park's

sighted mountains as a major feature of the continent. Thus was born an enduring mountain chain of dubious pedigree. Or did Rennell get the idea from exploration literature that pre-dates Park's journey?



At any rate, subsequent cartographic renderings of Africa's interior placed trust in the work of Park and Rennell, and the Kong and Moon mountain ranges lived on. On some maps, in fact, a combined chain of mountains appears from one side of the continent to the other, stretching almost 3000 miles! Photos What's more, the fiction spread. The historians Thomas Basset and Phillip Porter identified forty maps showing this mountain chain between 1798 and 1892. Englishmen John Cary, Aaron and Samuel Arrowsmith, John Pinkerton, and John Thomson, Frenchmen Adrian Hubert Brue and Alexandre Lapie, and American Henry Schenk Tanner all perpetuated the it. In fact, established cartographers only abandoned the *Montagnes de Kong* after French explorer Louis Gustave Binger definitively established their nonexistence in his own 1887-8 expedition to chart the Niger. 5

Strangely enough, even as so many 19th century maps reflected the spurious mountain range, the real deal was missed by perhaps all but the ancients: a tall range of snow-covered peaks starting just inland

of Africa's central *eastern* edge that we now call the Rwenzori. The Rwenzori is a chain once labeled by Ptolemy "the snowy source of the Nile." It was also called the Jibbel el Kumri by Arab explorers. Much later (and confusingly) it has been called the Lunae Montes, which of course means Mountains of the Moon, except these real mountains are far to the east of the earlier fiction.

The Rwenzori Mountains were only verified when an American journalist named Henry Stanley made his famous trek into the African interior in search of David Livingstone in the 1880s. Stanley wrote at the time from a camp in the Congo about his first view of the Rwenzori, "Following its form downward, I became struck with the deep blue-black color of its base. Thus I became for the first time conscious that what I gazed upon was not the semblance of a vast mountain, but the solid substance of a real one with its summit covered with snow."

The Rwenzori are now part of the story of global climate change. When Stanley first saw those mountains, they were topped by glaciers and snow estimated at more than three miles in size. Today less than half a square mile remains. ⁶

So Mungo Park and subsequent explorers of Africa missed a real mountain landmark – the tall Rwenzori, which are partly responsible for an important river and for the survival of area tribes. But put in context, the intrepid journeymen have to be forgiven because of course they lacked our modern technology. They certainly did not lack for courage. The 'Unknown Parts' of the African continent was a forbidding place, well earning its dark reputation. One of the last mapped areas of the world, Africa held fast to its secrets.

Footnote 1: Oscar I. Norwich. Norwich and separately, Richard Betts wrote the defining reference works for African cartography.

Footnote 2: Park's adventures ended not unlike Cook's; both perished either at the hands of natives or, in Park's case, drowning in an attempt to escape them during his second African expedition.

Footnote 3: Keeping the hat was fortunate because Park's notes were in the headband.

Footnote 4: Park had to be grateful for the good fortune of meeting a well-known slave trader who urged him to rest before continuing any further with his recurrent malarial fever; the irony being that the *African Association*, his employer, was avowedly anti-slavery. One of the first modern historians, Edward Gibbon, was a member of the Association criticized for also being anti-religious after writing *The Decline and Fall of Rome*.

Footnote 5: Binger found the origin of the Niger in the Gulf of Guinea along a boomerang-shaped flow to the Ivory Coast.

Footnote 6: Mount Stanley is a mountain located in the Rwenzori range. With an elevation of 5,109 m (16,763 ft), it is the highest mountain of both the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda, and the third highest in Africa.

References:

Norwich, Oscar I. (1997) *Norwich's Maps of Africa*

Sattin, Anthony (2004) *The Gates of Africa: Death, Discovery, and the Search for Timbuktu*