The RGS-IBG map collection

The map collection at the RGS-IBG is very large and diverse: it encompasses more than a million maps and charts. The majority of maps in the collection date from long 19th century and are connected to the expansion of the British Empire. The RGS had a close involvement with the British Empire, sponsoring many of the expeditions preceding or accompanying the imposition of colonial rule.

Imperial maps

Maps were used during the era of British imperialism and colonialism as instruments of empire. For example, maps could anticipate empire by claiming lands on paper before they were officially occupied. Maps could also legitimate conquest by depicting territories as empty of Indigenous peoples.

While such imperial maps might give the impression that they represent the world “objectively”, they are biased in various ways. For example, European maps conceive of a world that is fixed in a two-dimensional representation, with the earth’s spherical shape flattened out using different projection techniques. This distorts the sizes of continents and can make the British Empire look bigger than it actually was.

Indigenous mapping traditions

There are many other mapping traditions besides the European one, which use different materials and techniques. For example, in the nineteenth century, the Inuit of northern Canada used tactile maps made of wood to navigate.

Hybrid maps

Sometimes, different mapping traditions mixed, resulting in hybrid maps. An example of this is Tupaia’s chart, which was created by Tupaia, a Polynesian navigator and high-priest who joined James Cook on his ship in Tahiti in 1769. Tupaia helped Cook navigate through the Society Islands and to Aotearoa New Zealand. Tupaia drew a chart, which shows 74 Pacific islands, while he was aboard Cook’s ship. At first glance, the chart might resemble a traditional European chart. However, the positions of the islands correspond more to the Polynesian view of the world than that of Europeans. On Tupaia’s chart, the distances between the islands refer to the time it takes to sail between them rather than their measurable distance from each other. So, this chart presents Polynesian navigational knowledge in a form familiar to Europeans—a western-style chart. Because of language barriers between Tupaia and Cook, Tupaia learnt European conventions of mapping in order to communicate navigational information to Cook.

Conclusions

There are many different mapping traditions around the world and sometimes these traditions mix, producing hybrid maps.

Maps are not unbiased representations of the world, but they are cultural artefacts, made by people who bring their own ways of viewing the world to making a map. Maps are not just images, but objects, which exist in time and pace. Their production is a process, and they both records of cross-cultural exchanges as well as geographical representations.