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African Cultural Astronomy

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8fw285ms>

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Publication Date

2011-05-06

Peer reviewed

THEN DIG

Peer-reviewed archaeology blogging



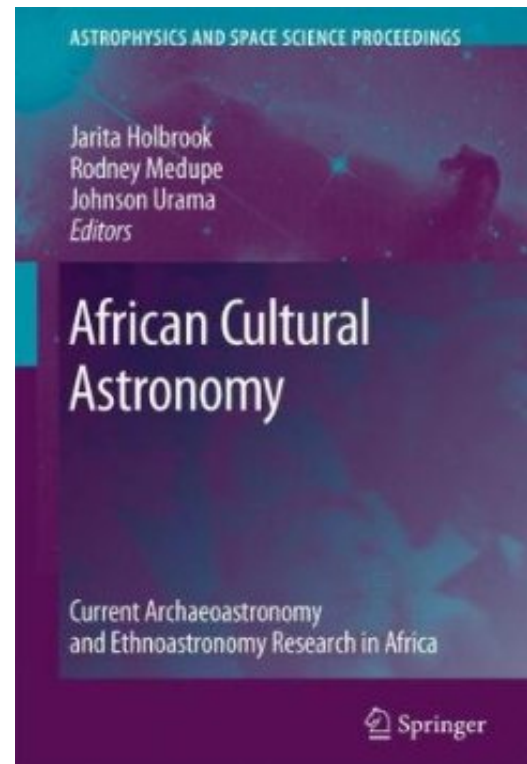
African Cultural Astronomy eds. Jarita Holbrook, Rodney Medupe & Johnson Urama

Some books become landmarks through recognition of the scholarship within. Even if they are superseded decades later, people still refer back to them as defining an approach. Some books are landmarks simply by virtue of existing and African Cultural Astronomy is one of these. If it the book were awful, it would still be important as it gathers work on a much neglected area of archaeoastronomy. Thankfully the book has only one major problem.

The book is the product of people brought together by the 2006 Ghana Solar Eclipse conference. It's part proceedings and part textbook. The textbook element is a necessity as while there's interest in archaeoastronomy from archaeologists, anthropologists and astronomers, they often aren't speaking the same language to each other.

I forgot this, so after reading Jarita Holbrook's excellent introduction, my first reaction to Barth Chukwuezi's chapter on ethnographic methods was "Oh dear, this is a bit basic". In fact the whole first section is basic in places, and necessarily so. The following chapter on the geography of Africa by Basil U Eze is probably also elementary to anyone familiar with the continent. In this light, far from being bad Chukwuezi's chapter lays some much-needed foundations in Anthropological method for astronomers who may have never seriously considered what the issues are. The following chapters on The Astronomical Gnomon (J McKim Malville) and Naked Eye Astronomy for Cultural Astronomers (Jarita Holbrook & Audra Baleisis) talk about basic astronomy, and how you integrate that into cultural practice.

The remainder of the first section is about teaching Cultural Astronomy. Some of this I found a struggle. Its not *bad*, but teaching African cultural astronomy in the USA clearly has baggage and opportunities that you don't get with teaching about the prehistoric British Isles in the UK. It's not irrelevant or of tiny niche interest, at least no more niche interest than archaeoastronomy in general, but it's going to take me time to pull out what I can use from this section. Some of the chapters here might be focussed on Africa, but have wide appeal. Others are interesting, but personal stories and so less useful to me.



The second half of the book is about current research. Like all conference volumes the chapters vary, but plenty are well worth reading. J McKim Malville et al. have a chapter on Astronomy at Nabta Playa which makes sense, even if I'm not sure to what extent I agree with it. Nabta Playa is a stone circle in southern Egypt and various claims with varying degrees of sanity have been made about it. I've been wary of any of the claims as there's just the one data point. Malville *et al.*'s chapter is thorough about what has been found. While it can't magically produce a comparative circle, the one circle that is there is placed within its archaeological context rather than being purely about drawing lines to various star rises. I still don't have a firm opinion on Nabta Playa, but re-reading this will be my first action if I suddenly decide I need to get one.



The White Mosque of Chenini. Photo by Bartek Kuzia.

My favourite chapter is the following one – Romans, Astronomy and the *Qibla*: Urban Form and Orientation Islamic Cities of Tunisia by M. E. Bonine. The *qibla* is the direction to Mecca and used as a focus for prayer for Muslims. Inside a mosque it's indicated by a *mihrab*, a prayer niche in the qibla wall. Obviously building a wall is an architectural feature and while some mosques do have skewed interiors to indicate the qibla, most mosques are built around the qibla. An analysis of alignments shows that in reality most medieval mosques in Tunisia are misaligned, if the aim is to face Mecca. What Bonine points out is that most mosques are rectangular, and in a city grid, which means the qibla in turn affects the orientation of city streets. This would be fine, except some of these cities are older than Islam, so the grid came first. It means that medieval Muslims weren't stupid, but quite sensibly following prior orientations and placing the mihrab in the most

appropriate wall. But what is interesting is that these misalignments are all wrong in a similar way. They're all around 90° to the midsummer sunrise. Bonine traces the alignments back in time to the Roman period and the practice of centuriation, the division of agricultural land along fixed axes. This is close to what Michael Hoskin has called Archaeotopography, which he prefers to Archaeoastronomy as a term because it doesn't assume that an orientation has to have an astronomical significance.[ref]Hoskin, M., 2001. *Tombs, Temples and Their Orientations: A New Perspective on Mediterranean Prehistory*, David Brown Book Company. [0954086716](#) (Mendeley) [/ref]

The remaining chapters are much more literary and anthropological than archaeological. The Timbuktu Astronomy Project, the Yoruba and the Igbo all get chapters. The coverage of East Africa is lighter, but not wholly ignored; Opatá covers some East Africa astronomy in his chapter on Lore and Literature. I don't know if the bias towards the west is due to the conference being in Ghana, or a reflection of the focus of current work. It does mean anyone looking for another round of arguments about the Borana calendar and its archaeology will be disappointed. A common theme through all the anthropological chapters is that the wealth of knowledge about the sky in Africa has barely been touched. This is a shame as it could vastly help archaeological interpretations of sites as a reality check on astronomical practices. All in all the research chapters show how more research in Africa could be fruitful.

So what's the major problem? Shawna Holbrook in her chapter on Leadership points out that one of the difficulties in organising the conference in Ghana was the local attitude "All Americans have lots of dollars." It might not be true, but you can see where that belief comes from. Publisher Springer-Verlag is not, as far as I know, based in Ghana – so why they're charging \$169 / £112 for 264 page hardback book is a mystery. If you don't want to pay that for a hardback book the price for the softback is \$169 / £112. If the book isn't Print-on-Demand then Springer have been badly ripped off, because it certainly feels like a POD book. It's a massive problem for a book of this type because Africa is huge. Few people will be interested in all of it. So if you're interested in the Igbo, it's far more sensible to get the chapter photocopied on inter-library loan than persuade your college library to buy the book. That's a huge shame because it then means you miss out on the other chapters, which could spark some other line of inquiry. It's reasonable to expect Springer to charge more than plain POD for a book, because they're going to have additional costs in marketing the book, and if that marketing means that more people get to read the book, that's a justifiable cost. But if they really do need to charge \$169 / £112 to make the book happen they

urgently need to revisit their production processes. For comparison Lulu could produce a similar POD book for around £20 hardback or £10 paperback.

I paid £25 for my copy via Abebooks. If you're interested in African astronomy, and you can find a cheap copy via re-sellers, it's well worth a look.

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