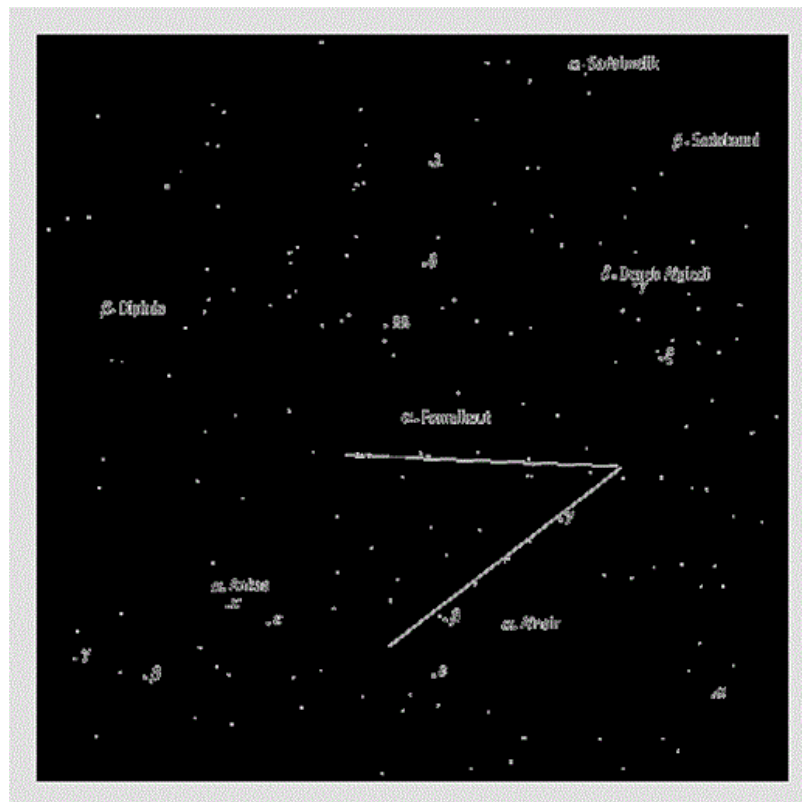


15.6.7 Path of the planets: Zodiac asterisms

The Sun travels across the sky along a path of stars in the sky called the ecliptic. The Moon and the visible planets which all lie in the plane of the solar system travel close to the ecliptic. The maximum distance of the Moon away from the ecliptic is 5 degrees; Mercury is the planet that travels furthest away, 7 degrees from the ecliptic, and Venus is at a distance of a little over 3 degrees. Venus and Mercury are always close to the Sun, so their distance from the ecliptic is not so important for naked-eye observing. Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn all stay within 2.5 degrees of the ecliptic; thus, knowing the constellations of the ecliptic aids in identifying planets in the night sky. The twelve Zodiac constellations are the constellations along the ecliptic plus an extra constellation named Ophiuchus. The Zodiac asterisms are: Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Leo, Cancer, Libra, Virgo, Sagittarius, Scorpio, Capricorn, Aquarius, and Pisces. The constellation names are the same except for Scorpius and Capricornus. There has not been very much research on local Zodiacs outside of European folk traditions, the Middle East and Muslim trade partners, and Asia, so any new information about people having a local Zodiac would be groundbreaking.

p. 365

Figure 15.10.



The Fan constellation from Fiji, unverified, consisting of very faint lines of stars.

15.7 Divination

Mentioning the Zodiac brings to mind astrology, defined as '[t]he study of the positions and aspects of celestial bodies in the belief that they have an influence on the course of natural earthly occurrences and human affairs' (Anon. 2004a).

p. 366

Astrologers rely on complicated mathematical calculations related to the positions along the Zodiac of the Sun, Moon, and the visible planets to predict personality, give opinions on decisions, predict the future, etc. Using the sky to predict futures on Earth is not unique, and variations can be found among many cultures