15.6.5 Cosmology

Cosmology is concerned with how everything is connected together into a grand narrative. Not all cosmologies begin with the sky, but they usually include accounts of what the sky is and how parts of the sky got up there. As mentioned earlier, typically there are local stories that explain how the stars or the Sun and the Moon got into the sky. Griaule's works with the Dogon of Mali (Griaule 1965; Griaule and Dieterlen 1965) are now classics of African cosmology, and include an examination of the relationships between sounds, numbers, metals, foods, animals, and buildings. The sky is part of the narrative but is of equal importance with many other earthly things like grains. The narrative is explicit about origins and how everything including humans and human relations are part of a cosmological pattern. Cultural astronomers are interested in where the sky fits in, whether the resulting universe is static or evolving, geocentric or heliocentric, the origins of humans are, and the impact of colonization and globalization on these cosmological narratives.

'Origin stories' are used here to focus on both the origin of humans (which may be different from their cosmology) and the origins of those local things that are considered to be from the sky. It is interesting to cultural astronomers if people believe that their ancestors came from the sky and/or return to the sky after they die. Details of where in the sky they came from and how they got to that location before coming to Earth have not typically been recorded. In West Africa, thunder stones were said to have fallen from the sky,
p. 364 though anthropologists identify many ↳ as tools used by our ancient ancestors (Balfour 1903). Sky metal or meteorites are also candidates for local objects that truly come from the sky, but other objects may have a magical or functional relationship to the sky that has been solidified by a legend about coming from the sky.

Ocean-going people may have origin stories and cosmologies that revolve around the ocean and deep water rather than the sky, such as mermaid and selkie myths. Comparing the mysteries of the ocean to the mysteries of the sky is of interest to cultural astronomers, as is determining if such marine cosmologies are restricted to proximity to large bodies of water.

15.6.6 Faint asterisms

The term 'faint asterisms' is to some extent a misnomer, since in places where light pollution is minimized the stars appear much brighter, and faint asterisms are easier to see as a result. In Fiji, a young girl identified a constellation that was entirely made up of faint stars which she said was in the shape of a fan. There were no nearby bright stars that I could identify; however, the asterism was made up of a series of pairs of faint stars that made a 'V' in the sky. I memorized that pattern but really had no hope of ever identifying the asterism again, until I saw it one night while I was stargazing back in the United States. I was able to identify the bright star as Fomalhaut in Pisces Austrinis (Fig. 15.10), and the asterism is part of Pisces Austrinus and Grus. Unfortunately, she was the only person to identify this asterism, so it is not publishable.