15.1 Introduction

Humans have a long history of watching the sky and incorporating the sky into their culture in the form of art and stories. They developed uses for the sky such as for timekeeping and night navigation. As with other parts of their natural environment, humans continued to watch and learn about the sky to better their lives throughout their history, resulting in an aspect of environmental adaptation that is often overlooked by scholars today. This chapter begins with definitions presented as a first step towards thinking about the many ways that people relate to the sky. This crash course in cultural astronomy should enable the reader to collect relevant information with some rigor and confidence. The interdisciplinary field of cultural astronomy is currently dominated by astronomers, and my personal goal here is to increase linguists' awareness of astronomy as a topic in field research, leading to them attending cultural astronomy meetings and publishing in cultural astronomy journals.

15.2 Definitions of Cultural Astronomy

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Cultural astronomy is broadly defined as the study of the relationship between humans and the sky. There are a couple of working definitions that provide details of this relationship such as that of Campion (1997: 1): 'the use of astronomical knowledge, beliefs or theories to inspire, inform or influence social forms and ideologies, or any aspect of human behaviour.' There are also the very functional concerns of archaeoastronomers set out by Ruggles (1993), rephrased in Bates and Bostwick (2000), and modified here for a linguistic audience:

1. Observation. What do people look at in the sky? Is there a celestial body that they look for repeatedly? Do they make predictions about the next appearance of a celestial body? There is a question as to whether non-academic sky watchers understand the physical forces underlying the celestial motions—the expectation is that they do not. Nonetheless, predictions can be made from long-term repeated observations without physical forces or formulae, and many cultures have done this, for example, predicting when the Pleiades star cluster will appear in the night sky.

2. Perception. What meaning do people attach to that which is observed—what is the cultural significance of the observations? This overlaps with cultural/ethno- classification systems.

3. Use. How do people use the sky? Use of the sky can be entwined with religion, agricultural timings, environmental adaptation, sociopolitical structures, or survival such as navigation by the stars.

Archeoastronomers study the physical remains of earlier societies to understand their observations, perceptions, and use of the sky (simply put, archeoastronomers tend to study dead cultures). Cultural astronomy encompasses these efforts, but cultural astronomers studying contemporary cultures have additional concerns, including:

1. Cosmology. 'In so-called primitive societies, cosmologies help explain the relationship of human beings to the rest of the universe and are therefore closely tied to religious beliefs and practices' (Anon. 2004b). Cosmology is how people tie together their cultural origin story as well as explaining why things are the way they are today. Often the celestial realm is included as part of creation: how the stars got in the sky (which is informative about cultural aspects of knowledge of stars), why the stars are not visible during the day, why the Moon has dark spots, and so on. Similarly, how did the Moon, Milky Way, planets, and meteors (shooting stars) get into the sky? How are the things in the sky related to things on Earth?

2. Stellification. People create asterisms (groups of stars) which they identify with people, animals, and