African Cosmos: Stellar Arts
Edited by Christine Mullen Kreamer with the assistance of Erin L. Haney, Katharine Moosted, and Karel Nel
reviewed by Sara Byala

African Cosmos: Stellar Arts, the impressive book that accompanies the show that opened in June 2012 under the same name at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art, proceeds from the assumption that African ways of knowing—in this case, as they relate to the heavens—have for too long been eschewed by outsiders. As Christine Mullen Kreamer, editor of the book and director of the museum, writes in her framing essay, the Western exaltation of the written word, general biases about indigenous thought systems, and tendency to isolate science from other fields of knowledge have rendered African celestial understandings largely overlooked. She aims to rectify this situation with exhibitions and books dedicated precisely to “exploring African contributions to the history of knowledge,” with African Cosmos (exhibit and book) comprising Part 2 in a series that began with Inscribing Meaning (Kreamer et al. 2007); an investigation into African written traditions (p. 14). The result is a rich and varied portrait of a continent gazing upward, whose case studies stretch ambitiously across time and space and whose contributors range from being art historians and curators to astrophysicists and artists.

African Cosmos is separated into three parts. In the first section, titled “Historical Overview,” Wallace Hooper traces the world history of astronomy, while Jennifer Houser Wegner draws attention to the advancements in astronomical thought that are associated with ancient Egypt. Both pieces use objects of material culture and written records to illuminate ancient Egyptian knowledge about solar and lunar movements (particularly with regard to time-keeping) and to explore how knowledge spread across the Sahara Desert to Timbuktu (where it was further refined). The book’s first section also contains three personal essays that compliment the historical accounts. In his piece, Thebe Rodney Medupe describes being one of the first black astrophysicists in South Africa. Filmmaker Anne Roger’s essay reveals the intriguing research that work on the films Cosmic Africa and The Ancient Astronomers of Timbuktu exposed. Finally, Katrien Kolenberg’s chapter, “Galileo in Senegal,” explains her work on a project of the same name that sought to merge local understandings about the heavens with Western astronomical tools. As a vignette onto what so-called ethnoscience can teach us, Kolenberg’s essay prepares us for the second section of the book.

Part 2 comprises ten case studies set at different times and places that span the divide between the ancient worlds of Egypt and Timbuktu and contemporary times. All of the chapters read in African societies deeper notions about humankind’s place in the universe. All move from the assumption, articulated soundly by Babatunde Lawal in his piece on Yoruba cosmology, that “African arts convey much more than meets the eye” (p. 217). Some of the case studies work from unique sources. For example, Marilyn Heldman’s essay on the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia uses written records, while Lawal’s work on the Yoruba explores a mixture of oral tradition, field observations, and interviews to probe instances of celestial understandings. Some of the cases pay particular attention to space, positing that architecture and landscape can reflect cosmological understandings. Randall Bird’s examination of nineteenth century Madagascar and Suzanne Preston Blier’s investigation of the plan of the ancient Yoruba city of Ile Ile offer absorbing accounts of early understandings of the cosmos. Other case studies focus primarily on material culture. Allen Roberts’s piece on how the Tabwa of central Africa utilize lines of symmetry and paradox—in everything from sculpture to scarification to origin stories—is informative. Likewise, Annemieke Van Damme’s study in the Democratic Republic of Congo finds...
celestial bodies made to serve as metonyms for social experience. In much the same way, Herbert Cole reads Igbo mbare houses and ijje masks and Karen Milbourne sees objects, performances, gestures, and colors in Western Zambia as indicative of cosmic ideas. For all, African art and ways of living reference larger, celestial notions.

At their most intriguing, several case studies offer us instances where African understandings of the firmament were superior to those of Westerners. Kolenski shares the fascinating account of an old marabout who helped “find” a so-called lost star that had eluded outside scientists. Kreamer raises the possibility that Dogon star-gazers had knowledge of the star Sirrus B, which is not visible to the naked eye, long before Westerners were able to locate it with a telescope. Deirdre Lapin describes how the Nga in Nigeria astounded Westerners with their uncanny ability to predict the time and placement of the moon’s appearance, something complicated enough to warrant a computer program. Here and elsewhere, African Cosmos provides instances where African understandings do more than just inform ethnographic inquiries; they demonstrate the potential to add to humanity’s knowledge of the skies more broadly conceived.

As tempting as it is to want more of these types of stories, tales that confound the point of view against which this book is written (that Africans have no worthy knowledge), a closer reading of African Cosmos suggests a more profound, if less obvious reflection. The third section, on contemporary art, hints at precisely this lesson. As Kreamer writes, artists today “challenge the artificial boundaries that tend to separate science and technology from the arts and humanities, the past and the present, the local and the global” (p. 302). Contemporary African artists train themselves to efface the very oppositional notions that have until now served to render Africa (and African intellectual contributions) as being somehow “less than” that of Westerners. The three chapters here all focus on South African artists who live on the cusp of the cradle of humanity, where life ostensibly began (p. 353). Marcus Neustetter, in an interview with Erin Haney, describes his preoccupation with the South African community that resides near—and must coexist with—the SALT telescope project as a meeting of old and new. Willem Boshoff’s piece similarly shows his regard for his surroundings, detailing his fascination with ancient KhoSan rock paintings and the fact that their language contained thirty-six different words for moon. In his capstone piece, Karel Nel draws together the main thrust of the book by describing his experiences as the artist in residence on the COSMOS evolution survey. Working alongside scientists, Nel has dedicated himself to overcoming what he sees as a false divide between science and art, the West and the rest, and to embracing gaps in humanity’s knowledge that such a position exposes. As he puts it, “It is curious that we associate science with certainty, when it is clear that the more we seem to know, the more there remains to know, and the less things are knowable” (p. 356). It is curious that we tend to think that Africa—the site from where humans emerged—would not have much to teach us about the skies. In fact, the converse holds true, as this lovely book demonstrates, not simply about the African past and present, but also about the possibilities for future knowledge. Once considered to be but a place of darkness, devoid of the light of knowledge, there is something highly telling in the fact that, as Rogers writes of South Africa specifically, there exists in African today “ideal atmospheric conditions … that facilitate the best sky-watching anywhere on earth” (p. 95). In other words, the very kind of darkness that is fast disappearing from light-polluted Western skies, but that still exists in remote parts of Africa, is precisely the key to unlocking the heavens above.

**Sara Byala** is a Senior Writing Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania. She is author of A Place that Matters Yet: John Gubbins’s MuseumAfrica in the Postcolonial World (Chicago: June 2013). sarabyala@gmail.com

**References cited**


African Art and Agency in the Workshop

Edited by Sidney Littlefield Kasfir and Till Förster

African Expressive Cultures, Patrick McNaughton, editor

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African Art and Agency in the Workshop groups together sixteen essays by twelve scholars who have done research on the topic of the book’s title. The workshops are located in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique, Kenya, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Côte D’Ivoire. Some of the essays are based on historic research, while others are based on fieldwork.

The work deals with change and iteration in art. African workshops provide the basis for the study of the interplay of individual creativity and a given production situation. The editors note in the introduction that the wide variety of workshop constellations cut across the divide between tradition and modernity (p. 4).

Art history today tends to focus on individual creativity, and consequently, the collaborative nature of workshop productions carries a somewhat negative connotation: it suggests handicrafts. On the other hand, “art” is something that must be learned everywhere in the world. The borders between art, craft, manufacture, ethnographica, and design were, for example, fluid in nineteenth century Europe.

In the introduction, Förster and Kasfir mention Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius, who maintained the arts were best learned, understood, and taught when artists work as a team, not in splendid isolation (p. 8). The workshop is “one of the most basic institutions of production of African Art and culture” (p. 1). The anchor for this argument is the supposed interplay between the workshop as an economic and social institution and the workshop as a space where individual and collective agency meet (p. 19). Workshops offer a unique occasion to observe and document how cultural knowledge of art is reproduced (p. 323).

Not so long ago, the accepted picture was that artists in oral cultures of Africa were
There could be no better place than South Africa with its turbulent colonial history, past institutionalized racism, and postcolonial conditions that want to forgive the past to carry out such an informed study. Byala demonstrates the power of culture in understanding the history of people and a modern nation, however problematic this may be.

Sara Byala has given us a meticulously detailed and researched account of the history and transformation of a single institution: MuseumAfrica.

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