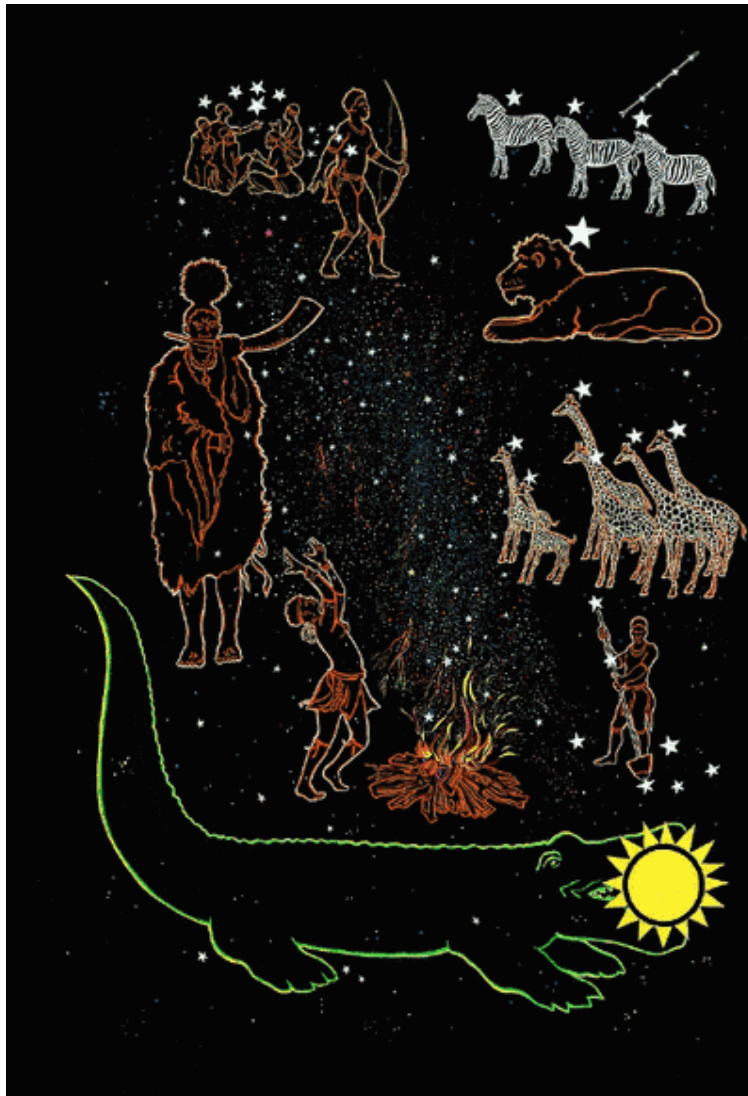


African Starlore



A poster was produced as part of the "Friends with the Universe" project which formed part of South Africa's first year of Science and Technology, YEAST, in 1998. The Starlore poster was the first in a series of ten which were distributed nationally. The aim of Friends was to use astronomy as a vehicle to promote science amongst the diverse communities in South Africa.

The [motif of the poster](#) (280kB) which is reproduced above comprises various scenes depicting legends of southern Africa that relate to the heavens. It was created by Braam Botha, and the copyright rests with SAAO. A small collection of legends assembled from many sources by Dr Dave Laney of SAAO is included below. Scenes from the poster image are juxtaposed with the relevant legend. Click on a part of the image to go straight to the legend.

Legends of the Khoikhoi and the San

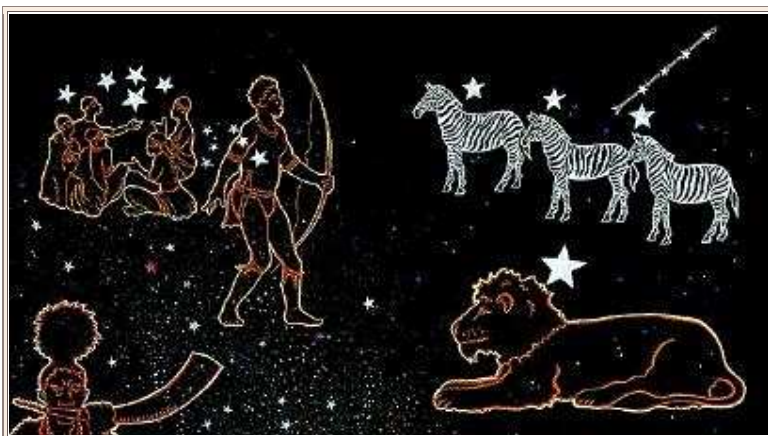
- A girl child of the old people had magical powers so strong that when she looked at a group of fierce lions, they were immediately turned to stars. The largest are now in Orion's belt.



A strong-willed girl became so angry when her mother would not give her any of a delicious roasted root that she grabbed the roasting roots from the fire and threw the roots and ashes into the sky, where the red and white roots now glow as red and white stars, and the ashes are the Milky Way. *Dornan. The Bushmen (1925).*

And there the road is to this day. Some people call it the Milky Way; some call it the Stars' Road, but no matter what you call it, it is the path made by a young girl many, many years ago, who threw the bright sparks of her fire high up into the sky to make a road in the darkness. *Leslau, Charlotte and Wolf. African Folk Tales (1963).*

- When the Pleiades appear in the east, little ones are lifted by their mothers and presented to the stars . . . The Pleiades are considered friendly and the children are taught to stretch their hands toward them.
- The Pleiades, named *Khuseti* or *Khunuseh* by the Khoikhoi, are called the rainstars. Their appearance indicates the rainy season is near and thus the beginning of a new year. *Hahn. The Khoikhoi, or Bushmen (1881).*
- . . . when rain is accompanied by lightning, girls who are out in the open become killed by the lightning and are converted into stars. Therefore young unmarried women and girls must hide themselves from the rain. *Schapera (1930).*



According to the Namaquas, the Pleiades were the daughters of the sky god. When their husband (Aldebaran) shot his arrow (Orion's sword) at three zebras (Orion's belt), it fell short. He dared not return home because he had killed no game, and he dared not retrieve his arrow because of the fierce lion (Betelgueuse) which sat watching the zebras. There he sits still, shivering in the cold night and suffering thirst and hunger.

- Initiated men among the Namaqua could not partake of hare's flesh. Long ago the moon sent a message to men that as it died and was renewed, so should men be. The hare told men instead they would die and perish like the hare, but said nothing of renewal. *Tooke. The Hottentots (1888).*
- The Sun was once a man who made it day when he raised his arms, for a powerful light shone from his armpits. But as he grew old and slept too long, the people grew cold. Children crept up on him, and threw him into the sky, where he became round and has stayed warm and bright ever since.

The Sotho calendar



Canopus was called *Naka* (the horn), or *E a dishwa* (it is carefully watched). Sotho men would camp in the mountains, where they made fires and watched the early morning skies in the South. It was believed that the first person to see the star would be very prosperous that year, with a rich harvest and good luck to the end of his life. In olden times the chief would give the lucky man a heifer. The day after *Naka* was sighted was the time for the men with divining bones to examine their bones in still water, to predict the tribe's luck for the coming year. Among the Venda, the first person to see *Nanga* (Canopus) in the morning sky announced his discovery by climbing a hill and blowing a sable antelope horn (*phalaphala*). Among the Mapeli, the first person to see the star would begin ululating loudly enough to be heard in the next village, which would then join the noisemaking to warn other villages, each in turn until all knew Canopus had been seen.

- When *selomela* (the Pleiades) rose in the east, frost was at hand and the leaves fell from the trees in the river beds.
- If the *senakane* (the little horn) (Achernar) when rising in the East is very bright and giving off little lightnings, and the bullrushes are still in flower, men fear an early frost. If Canopus is seen in May with a very intense light, the frost would be very hard.
- The shield of the little horn is the Small Magellanic Cloud, known as *mo'hora le tlala*, 'plenty and famine'. If dry dusty air made it appear dim, famine was to be expected.



The bright stars of the pointers and the southern cross were often seen as giraffes, though different tribes had different ideas about which were male and which were female. Among the Venda the giraffes were known as *Thutlwa*, 'rising above the trees', and in October the giraffes would indeed skim above the trees on the evening horizon, reminding people to finish planting.

Tswana

- The sky is stone, and the earth is flat. Water is beneath the earth and above the sky.
- The waning moon spills diseases.
- Its markings are a woman carrying a child, who was caught gathering wood when she should have been at a sacred festival.
- For the Tswana, the stars of Orion's sword were '*dintsa le Dikolobe*', three dogs chasing the three pigs of Orion's belt. Warthogs have their litters while Orion is prominent in the sky --- frequently litters of three.



Some believed that after sunset the sun traveled back to the east over the top of the sky, and that the stars are small holes which let the light through. Others said that the sun is eaten each night by a crocodile, and that it emerges from the crocodile each morning.

- *Ntshune* was a star (possibly Fomalhaut) visible on winter mornings. This 'kiss me' star showed the time for lovers to part before parents found them.
- The small constellation of Delphinus may have been seen by the Tswana as a mopane worm.

Sotho, Swazi, Nguni

- The sun's 'summer house' and 'winter house' (the solstices) were important to the traditional calendar as in many other parts of the world. To the Xhosa these were '*injikolanga*', 'the turning back of the sun'. As late as 1921, governors of royal Swazi villages trusted traditional observations more than printed calendars.
- Venus: *iCelankobe* (Zulu) = 'asking for mealies'. As with the Sotho *Se-falabogogo* ('crust scrapings'), the idea is that someone who arrives for supper by the light of the evening star will do rather badly. The Tswana believed that if Venus were in the evening sky at hoeing season, there would be a good harvest.
- According to Credo Mutwa, the Southern Cross is the Tree of Life, 'our holiest constellation'.



isiLimela or the Pleiades were the 'digging stars', whose appearance in southern Africa warned of the coming need to begin hoeing the ground. All over Africa, these stars were used as a marker of the growing season. 'And we say *isiLimela* is renewed, and the year is renewed, and so we begin to dig'. (Callaway 1970). Xhosa men counted their years of manhood from the time in June when *isiLimela* first became visible.

- To Xhosas, the Milky Way seemed like the raised bristles on the back of an angry dog. Sotho and Tswana saw it as *Molalatladi*, the place where lightning rests. It also kept the sky from collapsing, and showed the movement of time. Some said it turned the Sun to the east.
- For Swazi and Zulu skywatchers, *iNqonqoli* or *Ingongoni* was a star associated with wildebeest, whose calves were born in the season when Spica rose before the sun and the morning star.
- Canopus was known to some tribes as the 'ants' egg star' because of its prominence during the season when the eggs were abundant.