

NATIONALISM AND POLITICS IN THE RECOVERY OF PAST ASTRONOMIES

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Abstract

Since its origins, archaeoastronomy has been influenced by nationalist traditions in archaeology. This paper addresses the consequences of these political influences, considering several important questions: To what extent is this quest for past astronomies influenced by nationalist political agendas? How should those of us studying past astronomies respond to these external pressures? To what extent is comparatively recent ethnographic and folkloric evidence suitable for the recovery of past astronomies? The author considers that awareness of these influences and limitations is essential for any scholarly attempt to recover past astronomies.

Key words: nationalism, colonialism, imperialism, cultural identity, historiography, folklore, ethnography, romanticism, tourism, cultural revival.

Introduction

As the Conference Announcement says: “The purpose of the round table discussion is to propose a critical examination of the value and limitations of astronomical and cosmological traditions found in folklore, archaeology, and the historical records used sometimes as evidence for national or cultural identity. How (or whether) we can reconstruct past astronomical practices and cosmological knowledge from the limited evidence we have at hand? Our goal is to frame the problem and prepare further discussions.”

I would like to address the aspect of this topic dealing with the possible influences of local, regional, or national agendas on the integrity of our work. I was drawn to this idea as I became concerned about the faint scent of nationalist agendas in some of the presentations that I’d seen of late, both at conferences and in submissions to the journal, *Archaeoastronomy*. I kept recalling Olaf Pedersen’s comments (1982, p.269) on the history of archaeoastronomy at Oxford I, where he noted how archaeoastronomy was discredited for decades by its association with the nationalist search for the ancient German origins of astronomy. He closed his critique with the comment that “today ‘archaeoastronomy’ does not have any mythical function – or does it?”

Since archaeoastronomers have, in the last forty years, been fully conscious of the epistemological ambiguities of our reconstructions of past astronomies and our attempts to place those astronomies in their cultural contexts, we must also be sensitive to the various pressures in our modern contexts which may push us to create popular illusions.

Pedersen’s questioning of archaeoastronomy’s role in the creation of national mythology invites a critical examination of the value and limitations of folklore, archaeology, and the historical record as evidence for a nation’s astronomical traditions. Several traditions of historical, archaeological, and anthropological criticism can contribute to this discussion.

Critiques of Nationalist Scholarship

One of the most strident historiographical critiques of the myth of the nation in history is that of the American medievalist, Patrick Geary. He presented the influence of nationalism upon history – and for that matter, the contributions of historians to nationalism – as both an absolute evil and as an ethical challenge to historians (2002, p.15):

[I]t has turned our understanding of the past into a toxic waste dump, filled with the poison of ethnic nationalism, and the poison has seeped deep into popular consciousness. Cleaning up this waste is the most daunting challenge facing historians today.

The British historian, Eric Hobsbawm, pointed out the logical connection between historical practice and the spread of nationalist ideologies in an invited plenary address to the American Anthropological Association (1992, p.3):

For historians are to nationalism what poppy-growers in Pakistan are to heroin-addicts: we supply the essential raw material for the market... What makes a nation is the past, what justifies one nation against others is the past, and historians are the people who produce it.

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Archaeologists Philip Kohl and Clare Fawcett extended Hobsbawm's metaphor of the corrupting dream-world of narcotics to many of the professions that contribute to archaeoastronomical and ethnoastronomical research (1995a, p.13):

Archaeologists (and perhaps linguists, folklorists, and ethnographers) must be compared with the concocters of even more powerful hallucinogens, which distort the past to the likening of nationalists intent on demonstrating the uniqueness of their people.

Defenses of Nationalist Scholarship

I should point out that not all studies of nationalism take such strong opposition to their subject. Trigger (1995) notes that while many crimes were committed in the name of nationalism in various parts of the world, it also provided a sense of group identity and meaning for individuals which have been the tools for resisting dynastic and colonial oppression and which led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this mixed evaluation, he considers that it is more important that we understand, rather than just respond emotionally to the phenomenon of nationalism.

Some take a more value-neutral approach. Since the nation remains today "the largest and most powerful collectivit[y] with which people possess an affiliation," these scholars seek to understand the "strength, scope, and intensity of this kind of collective identity, ...its origins and development... and [its] long-term persistence and/or changes" (Smith 2003, p.3; see also Anderson 1991).

For better or worse, there seems to be a widespread consensus in the literature that archaeology is often inextricably intertwined with external political motives.

Archaeoastronomy and Nationalism

Trigger (1984, p.360) pointed out one element of nationalist archaeology of special relevance to archaeoastronomy: its tendency to focus on the creative achievements of peoples assumed to be national ancestors.

One version of this nationalist archaeology has a long connection with some familiar elements of archaeoastronomy: Stonehenge and the British megalithic sites. In the hands of 18th century British antiquaries, such as John Aubrey and William Stukeley, popular discussions of the Druids came to emphasize their British, rather than French origins. They became the source of ancient philosophical and scientific knowledge, which was carried Eastward from Britain to Greece, to India, and ultimately to China (Fowler 1987, p.235-236).

Romantic interpretations of Stonehenge, such as William Wordsworth's view (1958, p.472-475) that it was shaped by the Druids, so to represent their knowledge of the heavens conformed to this nationalist agenda:

The popular picture of megalithic astronomy thus provides an object lesson of British cultural superiority as the source of Eastern learning, and by implication, of the legitimacy of their rule over those peoples who had benefited from their learning (Fowler 1987, p.237). Even in more recent times we find advocates of astronomy at Stonehenge making similar claims that the astronomy of Stonehenge was far in advance of anything practiced in the Mediterranean world (Hawkins 1965).

While our studies must focus on the specific historical contingencies of a particular time and place, we cannot allow our investigations of past astronomical achievements to slide into a kind of simplistic essentialism, where an undefined particular "national genius" is seen as explaining those achievements.

The Uses of Origin Myths

Another common theme in nationalist uses of archaeology is the desire to provide a people who currently occupy a territory and its rulers, a sense of legitimacy and antiquity through links to a primordial, mythic, and sacred past and to employ archaeologically defined common elements to define the extent of a people's proper territory. Such claims of continuity are contradicted by the evidence for the transitory nature of peoples emphasized by modern historians. Yet the creation and manipulation of these origin myths is not an exclusively modern phenomenon.

In places as diverse as early medieval Europe and pre-colonial Mexico, ruling elites have manipulated history to create ties to their ancient predecessors (Geary 2002, p.77-78; Fowler 1987, p.231-232). Turning specifically to archaeoastronomy, many of us are familiar with the Maya practice of computing astronomerological intervals to link events in the lives of contemporary rulers with significant events in the historical or distant mythic past (Aldana 2007)

Such appropriations of the ancient past continued in Mexico, especially after the Mexican Revolution of 1910, with which a policy of *indigenismo* created the image of "a coherent and defined nationality" that fully incorporated the pre-Hispanic past. Archaeology became important as a way to demonstrate the nation's past achievements and occupied a central place in the newly restored National Museum of Anthropology (Florescano 2000).

The public display of ancient knowledge extended this appeal beyond the scientific audience into the broader worlds of popular education and tourism. The well known solar hierophany at the Temple of Kukulcán (the Castillo) at Chichén Itzá draws crowds of tourists at the equinoxes to see the serpent appear to descend the staircase (you can barely see it in the left side of this image). This raises the further question of the extent to which the pressures of tourism drive the interpretation of ambiguous archaeoastronomical sites such as the alleged supernova petroglyph at Chaco Canyon or the Woodhenge at Cahokia.

Astronomies And Cultural Identity

Over fifty years ago the historian of astronomy, Otto Neugebauer, based his work on the transmission of astronomical ideas among peoples, arguing that astronomical and astrological ideas and parameters, by their systematic nature, provided one of the most reliable indicators of cultural communication (1951). Yet the very ease of the transmission of astronomical ideas emphasizes the danger in identifying a particular astronomical system with a particular people. Nonetheless, sometimes archaeoastronomy has used astronomical concepts to identify and even create historical peoples, as we have seen in Thom's studies of "megalithic man" (1954, 1961, 1966).

An example from Native American astronomies may shed some light on this point. It is well known that one of the most widespread Native American cosmological themes is that of the original quadripartition of the universe, delimited by sacred places (often mountains or water sources) marking either the cardinal directions or the directions of solstitial sunrise and sunset (McCluskey 1993).

One of the most common variants of this four directional schema is the association of the four directions with four colors to form a system of color-direction symbolism. The diffusion and distinctive local expressions of such systems offer an opportunity for considering the value of astronomical ideas as identifying markers of particular cultures.

In the Eastern Pueblos – specifically at the Tewa pueblo of San Juan – the directions are marked by sacred places at the conventional cardinal directions (Ortiz 1969, p.13-16). In the Western Pueblos – specifically at the Hopi pueblo of Walpi – the directions are marked by sacred places at the place of winter and summer solstice sunrise and sunset (McCluskey 1990). The difference between the solstitial direction markers at Walpi and the cardinal direction markers at San Juan Pueblo offers a clear example of how different astronomical

concepts can be associated with different peoples, and can thus be used as a marker of cultural identity.

A striking indication of the validity of this concept is the presence of the intrusive Tewa pueblo of Hano among the Hopi. Like the Hopi, Hano has a sun shrine atop the opposite mesa (Forde 1931). In this case, however, the shrine is due East of Hano pueblo; corresponding to the cardinal pattern which we have seen at the eastern Tewa pueblo of San Juan.

In this case, the archaeoastronomical data and the ethnohistorical record both indicate the existence of two distinct, but related, astronomical traditions. This suggests an important qualification of the nationalist historians' belief that cultural traditions are maintained over long historical periods. Here we see two communities which over long periods of time have developed distinct modifications of the Native American cosmological model, but over shorter periods of time have retained their distinct variants of that shared tradition.

Can We Reconstruct Past Astronomies?

Finally, let me return to the issue that I raised at the beginning: whether we can accurately reconstruct past astronomies and their social contexts. One of the leading critics of the historical reconstruction of past religious and calendric rituals and traditions has been the historian Ronald Hutton. In a series of important books, Hutton (1994, 1996) has looked at most of the so-called ancient traditions of English calendar festivals and has demonstrated fairly convincingly that most of them are early modern in origin, few of them being able to be traced back before the 16th century.

Hutton has pointed out, for example, that many of the festivities associated with May Day (which we can note is a "Celtic" mid-quarter day which gained notoriety in association with the Thom calendar) were in fact nineteenth century revivals – or perhaps recreations – during the social transformations accompanying the depopulation of the countryside and the growth of urban England.

Hutton's historical investigations, combined with the theoretical insights of Hobsbawm, Anderson, and others, raise serious questions about whether the recovery of past astronomies will actually reach back into the pre-literate past or will only reach back to the comparatively recent past when these "traditional" astronomies were invented.

What I draw from these studies is that our various efforts to reconstruct past astronomical practices should all be subjected to the kind of critical approach that

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we previously, and fruitfully, applied to the work of Alexander Thom. Now we can also look at the various political, economic, or national agendas that led people to record folklore and archaeological remains in the course of the last centuries as a way to recover and restore the lost past of a nation or a culture. We now see indigenous peoples striving to wrest control of their own histories from academic archaeologists and anthropologists in order to present their culture in a more favorable light. In this context, we must ask: to what extent do these local concerns to promote peoples or regions threaten to bias our work and how can we take advantage of them without compromising our academic rigor?

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NACIONALIZMO IR POLITIKOS ĮTAKA ATKURIANT SENĄJĄ ASTRONOMIJĄ

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje pristatoma konferencijos apskritojo stalo diskusijų įžanginė dalis, kurioje nagrinėta folkloro, archeologijos ir istorinių šaltinių vertė bei ribotumas rekonstruojant senovės astronominę praktiką ir kosmologinę sampratą. Tarp astronomines ir kultūrinės tyrinėjimų rekonstrukcijas ribojančių veiksnių paminėti lokaliniai, regioniniai ir nacionaliniai veiksniai, motyvuojantys daugelį kultūrinės astronomijos tyrimų. Pirmojoje Oksfordo konferencijoje Olafas Pedersenas, aptardamas nacių siekį ieškoti senovės germanų astronomijos šaknų, iškėlė mitinių archeoastronomijos funkcijų klausimą.

Su šia diskusija susijusi ir pastarojo meto istorinės, archeologinės ir antropologinės praktikos kritika. Dar aštresnė kritika kreipiama į tautos laikymą ilgalaikiu

istoriniu veiksniumi, trukdančiu suvokti praeitį, taip pat į žalingą tokių nacionalistinių interpretacijų poveikį šiuolaikinei politikai.

Nors yra ir ne tokių kritiškų nuomonių, išvelgiančių pozityvų nacionalistinių interpretacijų poveikį, kad ir kaip būtų, archeologija ir istorija neišvengiamai susipina su politiniais aspektais. Pagunda šlovinti praeities civilizacijų laimėjimus akivaizdžiai egzistuoja ir archeoastronomijos studijose.

Tai nėra naujas reiškinys: jau XVIII a. britų senovės tyrinėtojų nuomonė, kad Stounhendžo astronomija atskleidžia britų laimėjimus, puikiai tiko tuometinei imperialistinei Britanijos politikai. XX a. pradžioje porrevoliucinėje Meksikoje actekų ir majų astronominiai laimėjimai buvo įtraukti į nacionalinę tradiciją ir tapo svarbiu elementu kuriant ir skleidžiant naują tautinę tapatybę.

Taigi senovės astronominių laimėjimų interpretacijos yra pernelyg supaprastinančios esmę, kai šiems laimėjimams paaiškinti pasitelkiamas ilgalaikis „nacionalinis charakteris“. Tokie tvirtinimai apie tęstinumą neatitinka šiuolaikinių istorikų ir archeologų pabrėžiamos akivaizdžiai laikinos tautų prigimties. Detali astronominių tradicijų analizė rodo sąveiką tarp esminių idėjų ilgalaikio tęstinumo ir pokyčių, vykstančių jas perimant ir savaip išreiškiant įvairiose bendruomenėse.

Rimtą problemą atskleidžia Britanijoje pasirodę nauji darbai, kuriuose apie praeities religijų ir kalendorinių tradicijų senumą sprendžiama iš folkloro šaltinių ir labai retai pasitelkiami istoriniai tyrimai. Dažnai folkloras perteikia tik palyginti netolimoje praeityje susiformavusias „tradicijas“.

Pastangos rekonstruoti senovės astronominę praktiką pirmiausia turi būti lydimos kritinio požiūrio į anksčiau tradicinius archeoastronominius tyrinėjimus. Svarbiausias uždavinys – nustatyti, koku mastu lokaliniai ir nacionaliniai veiksniai gali kelti tendencingumo grėsmę tyrimams ir koku būdu mes galime išnaudoti juos nekompromituodami akademinio tikslumo.

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