

# AfAS

African Astronomical Society



# NEWSLETTER

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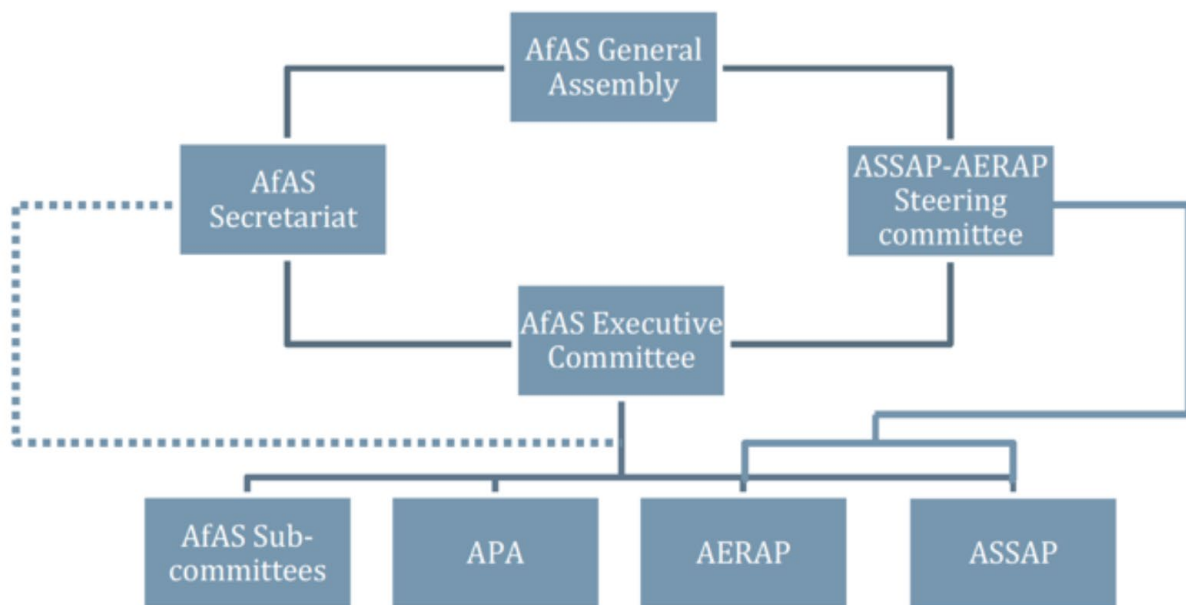
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# About AfAS

The African Astronomical Society (AfAS) is a Pan-African Professional Society of Astronomers, registered in South Africa, as a non-profit, voluntary society. Our vision is to create and support a globally competitive and collaborative astronomy community in Africa. Our mission is to be the voice of astronomy in Africa and to contribute to addressing the challenges faced by Africa through the promotion and advancement of astronomy.

Our key objective is to develop Astronomy and Human Capacity throughout the continent of Africa through a vibrant and active AfAS. South Africa currently hosts the Secretariat of AfAS through the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI), and our office is located at the South African Astronomical Observatory (SAAO) in Cape Town.



## Our Brief History

At the 2010 launch of the African Physical Society in Dakar, astronomers from across the continent and the African diaspora resolved to form the African Astronomical Society (AfAS). Following this meeting, a whitepaper on the formation and structure of the AfAS was drafted and disseminated. An Interim Working Group was formed to conduct the formation of the AfAS at the IAU Symposium in Ouagadougou. The initial Constitution of the AfAS was agreed to and signed by the members of the Interim Working Group at Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on 16 December 2010.

The interim Working Group consisted of members from Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and the U.S.A. AfAS was officially launched at the 2nd Middle East and Africa Regional IAU Meeting in Cape Town, South Africa, in April 2011. However, AfAS had not been an active organization since its inception in 2017, and at the 4th Middle East and Africa Meeting in Ethiopia, it was decided to bring together stakeholders and relaunch AfAS. In March 2019, the Astronomy in Africa meeting was held for this purpose at the SAAO in Cape Town, South Africa. At that meeting, a revised Constitution was approved and accepted by the delegates. The AfAS Secretariat was incubated by the DSI from April 2019 to March 2020 and has been fully operational since April 2020.

# Message from the Vice President of AfAS



In this edition of the AfAS newsletter, we are filled with pride and reflection on the incredible journey we have had together in recent months. The AfAS2024 conference in Marrakech, Morocco, the first to be held outside of South Africa, and the historic International Astronomical Union (IAU) General Assembly in South Africa, the first to be held in Africa in the past century of IAU history, were more than just events; they were milestone moments that forever changed the landscape of African astronomy.

AfAS2024 in Morocco was a celebration of our collective achievements in advancing astronomy research, outreach, communication, and education across the continent. Our choice of Morocco as host was deliberate, highlighting the great range of Africa's astronomical endeavors while emphasizing our dedication to cross-border collaboration. In this edition, we delve into the key moments from the conference, exploring the impactful discussions, groundbreaking research presentations, and the strong sense of unity that defined the event.

Equally significant was the IAU General Assembly, held for the first time on African soil in South Africa. This event was more than just a gathering of world professionals; it was a powerful message about Africa's growing prominence in

the global astronomy community. The General Assembly provided a unique opportunity for African scientists to shine, dispelling outmoded stereotypes and emphasizing the continent's leadership in a highly technical field.

These events demonstrate that Africa is more than just a participant in global astronomy; it is a leader with a voice that resonates on a global scale. We invite you to relive the excitement and energy of these gatherings through the articles in this newsletter, to learn from the insights shared, and to be inspired by the innovative and collaborative stories that emerged.

As we look back on these achievements, let us also look forward with a renewed sense of purpose. We are on a road of audacity and vision, pushing limits while sharing our rich cultural legacy and driving Africa's scientific advancement.

Thank you for taking part in this trip. We hope you will find this version both informative and inspiring.

Warm regards,  
Naomi Asabre Frimpong  
Vice President,  
African Astronomical Society

# Update from the Secretariat



It has been a remarkable year so far for astronomy in Africa, marked by milestone events, and we are excited about what the rest of 2024 still holds. This year also marks five years since the relaunch of the African Astronomical Society (AfAS), a milestone we have celebrated with a series of videos, social media posts, and a specially designed commemorative logo that reflects on our progress and achievements.

As we look back on a period of significant achievements, dynamic growth, and important transitions, we are reminded of the power of unity in advancing our shared mission: to foster a thriving astronomical community across Africa. From the bustling conference activities in Marrakesh to sharing the spirit of Africa with the world at the IAU General Assembly in Cape Town, AfAS has demonstrated its commitment to this mission. The AfAS Secretariat has had the privilege of being at the heart of these endeavours, working tirelessly to support our members, strengthen partnerships, and drive initiatives that resonate across the continent and beyond.

In our last newsletter, we shared the news that AfAS had signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the South African National Research Foundation (NRF) to take on the responsibility of organising the 2024 International Astronomical Union General Assembly (IAU-GA2024). As a result, the AfAS Secretariat played a pivotal role in the successful planning and execution of the

IAU-GA2024, held in Cape Town this past August. This landmark event drew significant participation from the global astronomy community and showcased the scientific contributions and advancements, including those emerging from the African continent. We were delighted to see strong engagement from our members and partners, and we encourage everyone to stay actively involved in future initiatives towards the legacy of this event. Let this first IAU General Assembly in Africa be the beginning of a brighter future and a stronger voice for astronomy in Africa within the global community. In this newsletter, we have included a message from the Chair of the National Organising Committee, Kevin Govender, reflecting on some key highlights of this historic event.

AfAS also marked another milestone with its first conference held outside of South Africa, in Marrakesh, Morocco, from 15 to 20 April 2024. This newsletter captures many of the memorable experiences shared by our participants at the AfAS conference. We are grateful for the support from our hosts, the Department of Science and Innovation, Breakthrough Initiatives, and other sponsors who helped us provide grants, enabling many from the AfAS community to participate in the meeting in Morocco. The AfAS annual conference was a great success, hosted by the Moroccan Local Organising Committee (LOC), with around 180 delegates attending in person and over 100 joining online throughout the week. The event featured 12 outreach activities, 10 astronomy clubs and associations, and 5 exhibitors, making it a truly dynamic and engaging experience. Additionally, the post-conference hackathon at Oukaimeden Observatory, organised by the Hack4Dev collaboration, was a success, further fostering innovation and collaboration. At the end of the conference, it was announced that the University of South Africa (UNISA) will host the 2025 conference in South Africa.

On the administrative front, we are pleased to report that AfAS received its full annual grant for the current financial year from the South African

Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) in May 2024. The DSI has committed to extending its support for AfAS for the next six years. This ongoing backing is essential for our efforts to promote the growth of astronomy across Africa. Furthermore, the external audit (2023/24) of AfAS has been completed, and I am proud to report yet another clean audit, demonstrating our dedication to transparency and sound financial management. In addition to these developments, we are excited to share that the Square Kilometre Array Observatory (SKAO) has committed to supporting the annual AfAS conference for the next three years, starting in 2024. During the IAU-GA2024,

AfAS and SKAO entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to collaborate on advancing astronomy on the continent. This partnership marks a significant step forward in our shared mission to enhance the visibility and impact of astronomy in Africa on the global stage.

The AfAS Secretariat is excited to welcome a new member to our team, Moloko Makwetja who joined us on 1 June 2024 as a young professional funded by the South African Radio Astronomy Observatory (SARAO). Moloko brings fresh energy and enthusiasm to the Secretariat, and we are pleased to have him contribute to our various initiatives. You can learn more about his background in this newsletter.

In line with our efforts to secure sustainable funding for our initiatives, AfAS has also entered into a one-year contract with a professional fundraiser, Ahmien van der Walt, starting on 1 June 2024. Funded by the International Astronomical Union (IAU), Ahmien's initial focus was on supporting fundraising activities for the IAU General Assembly 2024 (GA 2024). Following the GA, Ahmien is currently working closely with stakeholders and potential funders to secure much-needed resources for both the IAU Office of Astronomy for Development (OAD) and AfAS. We are optimistic that this approach will strengthen our financial foundation and enhance our capacity to support the growth of astronomy across the continent.

Thanks to the efforts led by our AfAS-BRICS stakeholder engagement officer, Moleboge

Lekoloane, I am pleased to announce that AfAS has been granted observer status at the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) for an initial three-year term. You can read more about this exciting development in this newsletter.

During the AfAS-2024 conference in Morocco, it was announced that I would be stepping down from my role at AfAS to join the International Astronomical Union Office of Astronomy for Development (IAU-OAD) as deputy director, effective from 1 May 2024. It has been a profound honour to serve as the first Head of the Secretariat of AfAS since March 2021. These past few years have been among the most rewarding of my life, filled with growth, learning, and an even deeper appreciation for the power of astronomy. I have come to understand that astronomy is not merely a scientific pursuit but a profound human endeavour that has the potential to inspire and connect people on a deeply personal level. It is an enterprise that extends beyond the quest for knowledge—it is something we do on behalf of humanity.

I am profoundly grateful for the unwavering support of the AfAS community, which has been integral to our collective achievements. I have had the privilege of serving under the remarkable leadership of Prof. Jamal Mimouni and Prof. Thebe Medupe, who, as presidents of AfAS, have been steadfast in their commitment to elevating African astronomy on the global stage. I also extend my heartfelt thanks to the two Executive Committees I worked with. I would like to express my gratitude to the DSI astronomy team, led by Takalani Nemaungani, for their unwavering support as the host of the AfAS Secretariat. My journey was further enriched by the collaborative work with the team at the IAU-OAD, whose partnership was invaluable.

The AfAS project manager, Yunus Manjoo, has provided great support and advice during my time at AfAS. On a personal note, I owe a great deal to my wife, Femidah, who stood by me through this journey, supporting me through challenges and the joys of welcoming our two children during critical times at the AfAS Secretariat. We fondly call them our "AfAS babies". While I did not renew my contract with

AfAS, I have continued as the interim Head of Secretariat and will do so until my successor is appointed, ensuring a seamless transition. This arrangement has been made possible through a collaborative agreement between the IAU-OAD, AfAS, the DSI, and the South African Astronomical Observatory (SAAO). Additionally, I will remain one of the official directors of AfAS to assist with any legal and governance compliance matters as needed. The recruitment process for a new Head of Secretariat is already underway, and I am confident that the future leadership will bring fresh energy and vision to propel AfAS forward.

As we look forward to more activities in 2024, we remain committed to our mission of advancing astronomy across Africa. The Secretariat team are grateful for the continued support of our members, partners, and the broader community. Together, we will continue to build a vibrant and inclusive astronomical community that inspires and drives astronomy in Africa forward.

Stay tuned for more updates and opportunities to get involved!

Dr. Charles M. Takalana  
Interim Head of Secretariat (Outgoing)  
African Astronomical Society (AfAS)

# Summary of Proceedings of the AfAS-2024 Conference and Business Meeting (15-20 April 2024)

The 4th annual conference of the African Astronomical Society (AfAS) took place from April 14 to 20, 2024, hosted by the Oukaïmeden Observatory and Cadi Ayyad University in Marrakech, Morocco. This historic event marked the first AfAS annual conference held outside of South Africa since the society's relaunch in 2019.

The conference drew over 500 registrations from astronomers, researchers, educators, and amateur astronomers from across Africa and around the world. Over 180 registered participants attended in person, with hundreds of others joining online through the Zoom and Sched platforms. The gathering aimed to foster collaboration, share cutting-edge research, and promote the development of astronomy across the continent.

The conference focused on science, outreach, communication, and education activities, emphasizing the importance of collaboration within the African astronomy community and with international counterparts.

A total of 260 abstracts were accepted for the AfAS-2024 conference, with 185 focusing on scientific research and 75 dedicated to Education, Development, and Outreach (EDO). The program featured 140 talks, with 100 centered on science and 40 on EDO, alongside 111 posters—80 for science and 31 for EDO.

Nine invited speakers, including five for science and four for EDO, enriched the sessions. The event also included 10 special sessions and two workshops, one on PANOPTES data reduction and the other on SALT proposal preparation. A roundtable discussion on the next generation of telescopes in Africa was organized by the hosts.

The conference hosted 10 astronomical clubs and associations, along with exhibitors, showcasing the vibrant and collaborative spirit of the African astronomical community. Outreach and public engagement were key

highlights, with 12 activities conducted in schools and public areas.

## The Activities included:

- **Stargazing events:**  
Engaging the public and students in observing celestial objects.
- **Classroom outreach programs:**  
Bringing astronomy education directly to schools.
- **Visits to local museums:**  
Including the Atlas Golf Museum, where participants engaged with the local community and demonstrated the wonders of astronomy.

Following the conference, a two-day data science hackathon was held at Oukaïmeden Observatory, focusing on developing skills for the next generation of astronomers. The hackathon was a collaboration between AfAS, IDIA, OAD, and the BRICS Intelligent Telescope and Data Network as part of the Hack4Dev project.

## Summary of Proceedings of the Business Meeting:

The final day of the conference was dedicated to the business meeting where reports were presented by the leadership team of the African Astronomical Society (AfAS), including the President, Prof. Thebe Medupe, the Head of Secretariat, Dr. Charles Takalana, the Finance Project Manager, Mr. Yunus Manjoo, and various committee chairs. These reports provided comprehensive updates on the current state, operations, and financial status of AfAS, highlighting significant achievements and future directions for the society.

### 1) Attendance:

Over 90 individuals attended the business meeting in person and via Zoom.



## 2) Agenda:

The agenda for the business meeting was circulated to members and participants and accepted during the meeting.

## 3) Reports:

Prof. Thebe Medupe, the President of AfAS, began the session by thanking the organisers of AfAS-2024, led by Prof. Zouhair Benkhaldoun, for their outstanding efforts in delivering a highly successful conference. He emphasised the exciting developments in African astronomy, noting that most of the talks were presented by African astronomers using African instruments. This reflects a significant advancement in the continent's capabilities and contributions to the global astronomy community, showcasing the growing self-reliance and innovation of African scientists.

●An announcement was made regarding the end of the contract for the current Head of Secretariat, Dr. Charles Takalana. While there was a strong desire for Dr. Takalana to continue in his role, he has decided to pursue a new opportunity at the International Astronomical Union's Office of Astronomy for Development (IAU-OAD) as Deputy Director. The Executive Committee is committed to a swift and smooth transition process, with Dr. Takalana serving as the interim Head of Secretariat in this period, under a special agreement between AfAS, IAU-OAD, and SAAO.

●Furthermore, updates on AfAS staffing were provided, highlighting ongoing efforts to strengthen and expand the society's capacity. These efforts include partnerships with the South African Radio Astronomy Observatory (SARAO) to appoint two young professionals, and taking the opportunity through the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) to appoint two additional young professionals. One focusing on enhancing AfAS communications (Zodwa Tiki), while the other supports BRICS+ initiatives (Moleboge Lekoloane), further expanding AfAS's strategic engagements and activities.

●The Science Committee Chair (Prof. James Chibueze) provided an update on the ongoing discussions to establish an African/ AfAS astronomy journal. This initiative has now been integrated with the

BRICS+ astronomy efforts, aiming to provide a dedicated open-access platform to support and publish research from astronomers across Africa and within the BRICS+ communities. The establishment of this journal will be a significant milestone in promoting scientific collaboration and knowledge dissemination within and beyond the continent.

●It was reported that AfAS has once again achieved a clean audit for the year, demonstrating sound financial management and accountability. The society remains in a strong financial position. The renewal of the AfAS funding contract by the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) for a period of six years, structured in two three-year cycles, was also communicated.

●AfAS has developed a comprehensive astronomy schools policy framework and has provided funding to several initiatives, including the Pan-African School for Emerging Astronomers (PASEA), the Oukaimeden International School for Astrophysics (OISA) at Cadi Ayyad University Observatory (OUCA), and the BIUST-MPG African Astronomy School (BMAAS). These initiatives aim to nurture the next generation of astronomers and strengthen educational infrastructure across the continent.

Link to AfAS astronomy schools policy framework: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IV-v7i4cgsmBGx6zCY7ZA8oVv6NudcbZ/view?usp=sharing>

●AfAS's participation in the American Astronomical Society (AAS) and European Astronomical Society (EAS) conferences was highlighted, where special sessions were organised to foster collaboration between African astronomers and their global counterparts. Additionally, outreach efforts led by Prof. Jamal Mimouni in the Sahel countries were recognised, underscoring AfAS's commitment to expanding the reach of astronomy and engaging diverse communities across Africa.

● An update on membership highlighted the new approval process, which includes a review by the Secretariat, approval by the Membership Committee, and endorsement by the Executive Committee (ExCo). AfAS now has a total of 98 members, including 235 full members, 65

associate members, and 98 student members. The gender distribution among members is 279 male, 166 female, and 3 other, reflecting ongoing efforts towards greater inclusivity and diversity within the society.

The membership committee has put together a survey for AfAS members and the community on the continent and a membership survey has been developed to gather input on membership fees and benefits, review our membership fee structure, and help us better understand members' preferences and needs. The results of this survey will be summarised, shared, and presented at the next General Assembly to ensure alignment with members' needs and expectations. This initiative is part of AfAS's commitment to maintaining transparency and fostering an inclusive, member-driven organisation.

Link to <https://forms.monday.com/forms/a3d70e14dfa49fad76c798b6d08a66c8?r=use1>

<https://forms.monday.com/forms/a3d70e14dfa49fad76c798b6d08a66c8?r=use1>

- The independent Working Group tasked with reviewing the AfAS constitution provided an update on their progress, which includes a community-wide survey. As part of their efforts to review and refine the AfAS constitution, the Working Group is seeking input from the community to help shape a constitution that aligns with our collective vision, meets the evolving needs of our society, and adheres to current best practices for organisations like AfAS. However, they noted a poor response to the initial call for input by the deadline of 31 March 2024. To encourage broader participation, they have extended the deadline to 15 October 2024.

Link to the current constitution: <http://www.africanastronomicalsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/AfAS-Updated-Constitution-approved-by-GA-19-March-2022.pdf>

Link to the form: <https://forms.monday.com>

### **Conclusion:**

The Business Meeting expressed gratitude and congratulations to the hosts of AfAS-2024, the Secretariat, and the Executive Committee for their dedicated work over the past year and their

efforts in organising the successful AfAS-2024 Annual Conference. Special acknowledgement was given to the South African Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) for its continued support.

The meeting also extended thanks to all AfAS partners, both within Africa and internationally, including Breakthrough Initiatives, SKAO, the International Astronomical Union (IAU), local partners of the host, the African astronomy community, and all participants, for their invaluable contributions.

# Navigating New Challenges: My Journey in Shaping the AfAS Conference in Morocco

By Meryem Guennoun



In hindsight, the AfAS conference was not just an event; it was a transformative experience. It allowed me to push beyond my comfort zone, embrace uncertainty, and emerge with newfound skills and confidence. As we reflect on the conference's success, I am filled with pride and gratitude for the opportunity to contribute to its legacy.

Assigned to oversee communication, marketing, and visual identity, I found myself thrust into roles I had never assumed. While initially daunting, this opportunity allowed me to unleash my creativity and explore new avenues. From filming promotional videos to crafting marketing plans, collaborating with the Marrakech Journalism Institute, and even interviewing participants and invited speakers, each task broadened my skill set and revealed talents I never knew I possessed.

Participating in the AfAS conference was undeniably one of the most exhilarating yet demanding experiences. Notably, it was a profound honour for Morocco to host such a prestigious event for the first time outside of South Africa. However, with this privilege came immense pressure to ensure its success. Behind the scenes, the journey was grueling. With preparations beginning nearly a year in advance, the final weeks leading up to the conference were a whirlwind of activity. Sleep

became a luxury as we worked tirelessly to ensure every aspect of the event was meticulously executed. Through this process, I not only honed my organizational abilities but also discovered newfound resilience within myself.

During the conference itself, striking a balance between my organizational responsibilities and personal engagement proved challenging. While I regret not being able to fully immerse myself in every session, attending the "Planetary Sciences in Africa" session was a highlight. It showcased the burgeoning interest and advancements in astronomy and space sciences across the continent. It provided a platform for African researchers to showcase their groundbreaking work, fostering collaboration and inspiring the next generation of scientists.

Discussions ranged from planetary exploration to exoplanetary science, with aspirations to establish an official African Planetary Sciences division within AfAS. Participating in discussions within my research field and exchanging insights with fellow astronomers reignited my passion for academic discourse and collaboration, and inspired me to do more. As we reflect on the conference's resounding success, I am filled with immense pride and gratitude for the opportunity to contribute to its enduring legacy.

# From Vision to Reality: AfAS Celebrates 5 Years with Landmark 4th Annual Conference in Marrakech

By Shirley Aoko

From table talk to hosting its 4th annual conference at Cadi Ayyad University, Marrakech, Morocco; the African Astronomical Society (AfAS) has grown to be one of the most reputable societies in Africa since its relaunch 5 years ago. The 6-day conference marked a milestone for the society being the first meeting hosted outside of the society's host country, South Africa. Astronomers from all over the continent and across the world gathered to celebrate the scientific achievements and collaborations within the African continent and beyond. At the heart of the conference were two concurrent sessions - the Scientific research and Exploration and Community Outreach and Education - from 250 accepted abstracts, each dedicated to separate yet interconnected facets of astronomical pursuits in the continent: science, education, development and outreach.

The opening ceremony served as a catalyst for discussions that laid the groundwork for future collaborations among attendees. The welcoming remarks by the hosts Prof. Zouhair Benkhaldoun and Prof. Abdelmajid Benhida highlighted their enthusiastic collaboration with the AfAS committee to co-host the event welcoming participants to the rich heritage of Moroccan culture and to one of the anticipated visits to the Oukaimeden Observatory. Their talks emphasized the importance of unity and collaboration with different organizations for the advancement of astronomy in the continent. Among the many captivating talks was one from the president of International Astronomical Union (IAU), Prof. Debra Meloy Elmegreen who also highlighted the significance of the scientific collaboration among the African countries. She also shone spotlight on the upcoming general assembly meeting set to take place for the first time on African soil in Cape Town, South Africa.

**Scientific research and Exploration sessions:** A wide range of topics were covered during the conference, from small bodies to star formation and to galaxies. There were keynote talks delivered by representatives from the

Square Kilometer Array Observatory (SKAO), underscoring the importance of collaborative efforts in the field of radio astronomy. The speakers highlighted the achievements through the partnerships and alliances with South African Radio Observatory (SARAO), National Research Foundation (NRF), Development in Africa with Radio Astronomy (DARA) and the SKA partner countries in advancing scientific research and human resource development.

The Science Organizing Committee (SOC) led by Prof. James Chibueze did a wonderful job in curating an impressive line up of the top-of-the-art presentations that cut across different disciplines in astronomy. While speaking to Prof. Yin-Zhen Ma, a professor at Stellenbosch University and one of the SOC members, commented "The SOC team had the most wonderful opportunity selecting the abstracts for the conference." However, sharing the



same sentiments, he acknowledged that more representation was needed in the field of optical astronomy to balance the numerous research activities in radio astronomy.

Among other presenters was Daniel Czech, a postdoctoral scholar with Breakthrough Listen at the University of California, Berkeley, who shared his expertise on the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI) using the MeerKAT telescope. During the talk, he highlighted the opportunities available for masters and PhD scholarships, and invited

students and researchers interested to join the quest to answer one of humanity's most profound questions: Are we alone in the Universe? The research opportunities at SETI are a call to action, a compelling invitation to be part of their groundbreaking search, blending curiosity with cutting-edge science.

Students had the exciting chance to join two transformative workshops: the Southern African Large Telescope (SALT) proposal preparation and PANOPTES data reduction led by Preethi Krishnamoorthy. These sessions immersed them in cutting-edge astronomical research, unveiling the secrets of data acquisition and its scientific applications. Through this hands-on experience, they gained invaluable insights into the workings of leading astronomy facilities, sparking a deeper passion for exploring the cosmos.

**Community Outreach and Education Sessions:** Meanwhile, in the parallel outreach sessions, astronomers turned their focus towards fostering a connection between the scientific research and the community. Interactive sessions and several outreach activities aimed to demystify astronomy and inspire curiosity through community engagements were carried out during the conference. From stargazing events to classroom outreach programs, participants explored innovative approaches to science communication, development and education. By reaching out to communities across Africa, the outreach sessions were filled with wonderful presentations on how different people are using astronomy for the betterment of communities and advancement in science for a better society.

"The outreach sessions were very valuable, very good to hear stories from so many different countries on how they were shaping outreach and development in their regions. It was a very good way to get updated on what other people are doing, to improve collaboration and to learn from other people's experiences. I think I would have enjoyed it even more if there had been more interaction between people from the conference and the local community, but this was maybe hard to facilitate also because of the language barrier," says Maaïke Prieke one of the Outreach Committee (OC) volunteers and a PhD student at the Radboud University.

One of the highlights of the outreach sessions was the visit to Atlas Golf Museum. It was an important engagement with the local community both young and old. Witnessing the enthusiastic reaction of the locals observing the moon through a telescope albeit some of them for the first time making it a remarkable experience. Astronomy is a unifying language, despite the language barrier, a mutual understanding of the cosmos could clearly be seen.



# An AfAS2024 Journey of Inspiration and Collaboration Article

By Tabitha Alango



As someone deeply passionate about astronomy education and outreach, attending the AfAS2024 conference in Morocco was an experience that left an indelible mark on my soul. Amidst the stunning landscapes and the rich cultural tapestry of Marrakech City, I found myself immersed in an enlightening and inspirational experience.

The conference not only provided a platform for sharing cutting-edge research but also highlighted the importance of astronomy in addressing societal challenges and fostering scientific curiosity among younger generations.

One of the highlights from the conference was attending the “Innovative Outreach Tools and Initiatives sessions.” I have always been passionate about finding innovative ways to inspire and engage students in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

(STEM) fields, and through the sessions I gained a handful of insights and ideas. From citizen science

projects to immersive planetarium experiences, I was amazed by the creativity and dedication of my fellow attendees in making astronomy accessible and captivating for learners of all ages. During my presentation, “Using Astronomy as a Tool to Challenge STEM Misconceptions among Students in Kenya,” I shared the experiences and insights from working with students in my home country. The lively discussions throughout the sessions reminded me of the powerful role that astronomy can play in breaking down barriers, fostering critical thinking, and inspiring a love for science.

Beyond the educational sessions, the conference also provided an opportunity for networking and collaboration. I listened and

interacted with researchers working on ground-breaking projects such as the Square Kilometre Array Observatory (SKAO). The conversations further opened my eyes to the vast potential of astronomy in driving scientific advancement and fostering international cooperation on a grand scale. However, it was the excursion to the Oukaimeden Observatory that truly left me awestruck. Situated high up in the Atlas Mountains, the observatory offers the perfect opportunity to witness first-hand the remarkable astronomical facilities in Morocco.

The clear skies, snowy mountain tops, and the beautiful streaks of sun rays were indeed therapeutic. The whole experience left me in awe of the wonders of the Universe and the dedication of the researchers who unravel its mysteries.

As I reflect on my experience at AfAS2024, I am filled with a renewed sense of enthusiasm for promoting astronomy education and fostering a love for science among younger generations. Looking ahead, I am eager to implement the insights and strategies gained from the conference in my work. Whether through developing new educational resources, collaborating with fellow educators, or engaging with local communities, I am determined to continue challenging STEM misconceptions and inspiring the next generation of scientists and explorers.

To the organizers, presenters, and attendees of AfAS2024, I extend my heartfelt thanks for creating an unforgettable experience that has left me starry-eyed and inspired to continue reaching for the stars.



# Highlights from the AfAS2024 Conference and Hackathon at Oukaïmeden Observatory

By Duduzile Kubheka

The AfAS2024 Conference took place in Marrakech, Morocco, from 15 to 19 April, followed by a visit to the Oukaïmeden Observatory on Saturday, 20 April. During this visit, participants had the chance to explore the site and the beautiful mountainous area overlooking the “Rooftop of North Africa,” the Atlas Mountains. Some participants, including the hackathon group, spent the night there in preparation for the hackathon beginning on Sunday, 21 April, and continuing through Monday, 22 April. Despite the cold weather and long walks up the mountain to the observatory, it provided a wonderful opportunity to connect with nature and with each other.

The stay at Oukaïmeden Observatory was particularly special for the hackathon participants. It provided an opportunity for meaningful time together connecting with each other well ahead of the hackathon. The bonding happened through fun games and activities that continued throughout the evening preceding the hackathon. Although we initially thought little of it, its significance became evident in their teamwork during the tasks. Even when placed in different teams, the familial relations endured, resulting

in the entire group working together effectively to solve challenges. This approach was unique compared to previous hackathons, one could argue that if we aim to foster team building and solid connections, this is the structure we should consider moving forward.

During the hackathon, Prof. Mohamed Hosni gave an introductory talk about Machine Learning and participants had access to tutorials and guidance from mentors. They formed teams and began working on the data challenge, employing machine learning techniques to classify astronomical objects using unsupervised learning methods. After the hacking period, the teams prepared presentations showcasing their results and presented them to a panel of expert judges.

The hackathon was completed by participants from various parts of Africa, bringing the AfAS Conference 2024 to a successful close and marking the end of our delightful stay in the beautiful country of Morocco.



# My Unexpected Triumph at the AfAS2024 Hackathon in Morocco

## By Toivo Samuel Mabote



I am a co-founding member and the Outreach representative of the Mozambican Astronomy Society (AMAS), and I recently achieved remarkable success at the AFAS Hackathon 2024 held in Morocco. This exciting initiative aimed to ignite a passion for data science and coding skills among participants. Over a 48-hour period, teams were challenged to develop innovative solutions analyzing astronomical datasets using various machine learning techniques.

I came to the AfAS conference to attend the conference and present my poster initially not intending to attend the hackathon and as the closing days approached, I stumbled upon the AfAS Hackathon. Though I had already planned my return to Mozambique, the chance to participate was too exciting to pass me by so I postponed my trip and joined the hackathon team at Oukaïmeden Observatory. This proved to be both intensely challenging and incredibly rewarding experience. The atmosphere was electric, buzzing with creative minds from diverse cultures and backgrounds. It was unlike anything I had experienced before.

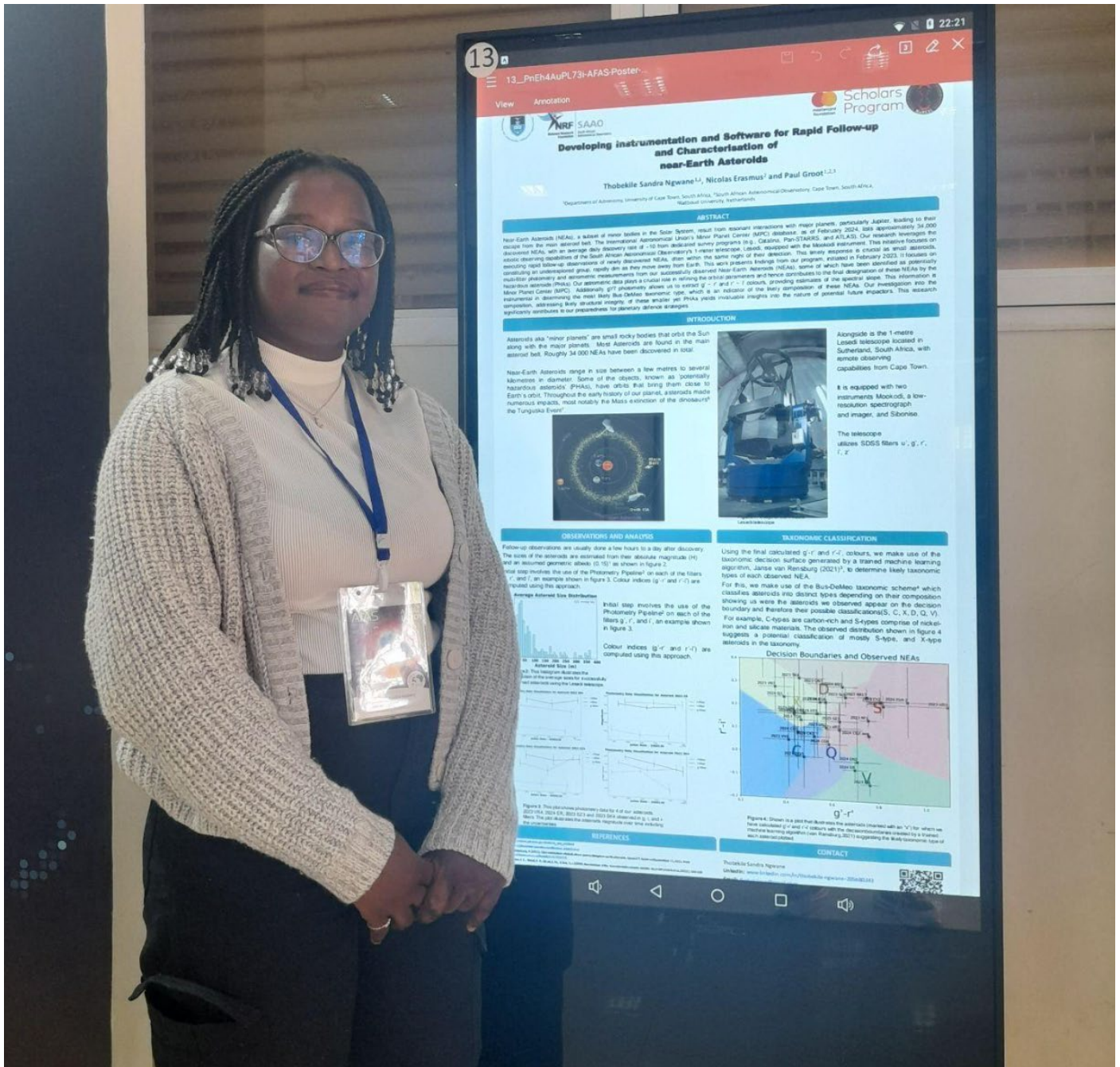
My winning team was a fantastic blend of four talented individuals: Abdoulaye Diallo from Senegal, Mary Dusabe from Kenya, Badreddine Aiz from Morocco, and of course, myself from Mozambique. We had a powerhouse combination: my expertise in astrophysics, alongside the technical skills of my teammates in Machine Learning Engineering and Data Science, Electronics and Instrumentation Engineering, and Web Development Engineering.

Our strategy focused on a crucial balance of strong technical skills intertwined with a solid scientific foundation. This approach set us apart from the other teams who solely focused on building complex machine-learning models. We prioritized a solution that was not just accurate, but also scientifically sound. By merging our skills and knowledge, we created a winning formula that secured our victory.

This experience solidified my belief in the power of collaboration. Even under immense pressure, exceptional results can be achieved through teamwork and a shared commitment to a common goal.

# Bridging Passion and Research: My Journey at the AfAS Annual Conference and Hackathon

By Thobekile Ngwane



After the AfAS annual conference and business meeting, from April 15-20, 2024, a two-day Data Science Hackathon followed from April 21-22 at the Oukaïmeden Observatory, offering scenic views of the Atlas Mountains and access to various telescopes, including the Transiting Planets and Planetesimals Small Telescope (TRAPPIST), which was part of the telescopes that observed the TRAPPIST-1 system a cool red dwarf star discovered in February 2017 located in Aquarius constellation about 40.66 light-years away from Earth.

Due to visa complications my arrival to Marrakech was delayed but I still managed to attend the exciting talks on the last day. The AfAS business meeting provided valuable ideas for the newly formed Zimbabwean Astronomical Society, which I started with colleagues passionate about astronomy and outreach. I also enjoyed the "Monitoring the Variable Sky with Wide-Angle Robotic Imaging: PANOPTES Data Reduction Workshop" talk. This workshop aligned perfectly with my research on robotic telescopes. I use the Lesedi telescope in Sutherland to conduct robotic follow-up observations of near-Earth asteroids.

The hands-on experience was incredibly beneficial for my master's research. Later that day, I had the chance to meet Dr. Kartik Sheth, a NASA Associate Chief Scientist. My friend and I spent the rest of the day exploring the Medina with him, learning about his career and academic journey, and receiving invaluable advice. This interaction was the highlight of the conference for me, as I deeply appreciated his insights and guidance. The next day, we travelled to the Oukaïmeden Observatory, situated 2,750 meters above sea level. The observatory hosts the TRAPPIST-North telescope, a twin of the

TRAPPIST-South telescope at the La Silla Observatory in Chile, instrumental in observing the TRAPPIST-1. It consists of two 60 cm (24 inch) reflecting robotic telescopes located at the European Southern Observatory (ESO) La Silla Observatory (housed in the dome of the retired Swiss T70 telescope) in Chile and at Oukaïmeden Observatory in Morocco.

I met many students and researchers in my field, and our interactions and conversations promise future collaborations. They demonstrated their methods for observing asteroids and comets, and their observer control systems, which was a fantastic learning experience for me. The hackathon, supported by the advanced South African ilifu data-intensive research cloud facility, began the following day.

I love hackathons because they challenge me to be a better problem solver. The event started with a lecture on machine learning and a tutorial on the Jupyter Notebook we would be using. We were then split into teams to work on a problem to separate AGNs and SFGs into two different clusters. The hackathon was intense, but I enjoyed the challenge and the opportunity to interact with other participants, including both familiar faces and new friends.

Overall, I had a wonderful experience at the AfAS conference and hackathon. It was an excellent opportunity to network with peers and be inspired to continue working hard in my astronomy career. The conference also featured many great outreach events, which I appreciated, as I enjoy doing outreach and felt it was a fantastic initiative to bring astronomy to the public. I enjoyed being in Morocco, learning about their beautiful culture and trying out their amazing food.

# Reflections on the 4th African Astronomical Society Conference

By Kira Hanmer

In April this year, I had the opportunity to travel to Marrakech, Morocco, to attend the 4th annual conference of the African Astronomical Society. I arrived in Marrakech late in the evening on the Sunday before the start of the conference, and was amazed by how busy the city was, despite it being late at night. The conference talks kicked off on Monday morning (the opening and registration took place on Sunday evening, but I did not land early enough to attend these), with parallel science and outreach sessions. I was attending to present my research, and as such, predominantly spent time in the science sessions.

The atmosphere at Cadi Ayyad University was immensely welcoming, and there were many astronomical societies who had been invited to set up stalls and attend the conference. The organizing committee made us feel welcomed, and the conference ran very smoothly.

I enjoyed all of the talks, and it was insightful to hear so much about the research being done by other scientists on the African continent. I was especially impressed to learn about all of the research being undertaken in Morocco. Most of this is related to Oukaïmeden observatory, which



is operated by the university, located in the High Atlas Mountains, and home to TRAPPIST-North. The researchers at Cadi Ayyad University have an impressive track record of work in asteroids, comets, and exo-planets. This is quite different to the main areas of focus in South Africa, and I enjoyed hearing about this research.

Another special aspect of the conference was the outreach which attendees were able to participate in: on Tuesday evening, we were taken by buses to Atlas Golf Marrakech. This venue, although a golf course, has a large optical telescope on the grounds which we were able to look through. Additionally, there was an amazing talk on science communication by Najib El Mokhtari, who is a well-known Moroccan science YouTuber. There was also a mobile planetarium which we were able to experience. Then, on Wednesday evening, there was an evening of stargazing at Jemaa el-Fnaa, again hosted by the university and AfAS. Telescopes were set up, and the public were invited to come and interact with the students and scientists present, and to look through the telescopes. The audience was very interested, and many people of all ages came to have a look, and I was really happy to be able to witness this.

The most incredible part of the conference, for me, was the trip we took on Saturday to visit Oukaïmeden. We left Marrakech on Saturday morning, and went about 70 km south of the city, and wound up at the Atlas Mountains, reaching an altitude of about 2750 metres (from an altitude of just 460 metres in Marrakech). The weather was drastically different to what we had experienced all week in Marrakech: the maximum temperature in the city had been at least 34 degrees Celsius on most days, and the maximum temperature in Oukaïmeden on Saturday was only about 11 degrees Celsius.

Something interesting to learn was that Oukaïmeden is actually also a ski resort – the largest in Africa, in fact! It is a breathtakingly beautiful place, and we could see snow on some of the higher peaks. We were hosted at a ski hostel, and the observatory was just a 20- to 30-minute walk away. It is hard to describe the beauty of Oukaïmeden, but I hope that the accompanying pictures will do it some justice. We were treated to a delicious lunch of tagine

when we arrived, and then we walked up to the observatory to look at the telescopes and for a talk by Dr. Youssef Moulane, who is a research scientist at the Institute of Applied Physics at Mohammed VI Polytechnic University, and who played a major role in the organization of the conference. I was amazed to learn that TRAPPIST-North was involved in the discovery of TRAPPIST-1, a system of exoplanets which are at the right distance from their star to hold liquid water. I hadn't realized that the system was named after the telescopes (TRAPPIST-South in Chile and TRAPPIST-North in Oukaïmeden) that had discovered it.

On Sunday morning we returned to Marrakech, and the organizers were kind enough to arrange for the bus to take us back to our hotel to fetch our luggage, and then onto the airport so that we would be in good time for our flight out of Morocco that afternoon. The conference overall was very interesting and extremely well run, and it is this and the hospitality of everyone there that I will always remember. I am immensely grateful to AfAS for covering and organizing my flights and accommodation so that I could attend in person, and to everyone in Morocco who made me feel so welcome and who contributed to making sure that the whole conference ran smoothly. I felt proud to be there as a South African, and to share my research with other students and researchers from the African continent, and I look forward to reuniting with many of the people I met over the week in Marrakech.

This trip not only enriched my scientific knowledge, but also deepened my appreciation for the vibrant, diverse scientific community across Africa, and I returned home feeling inspired and excited about the future of astronomy on the continent.

# Key Takeaways from the 4th AfAS Conference in Marrakech

By Venu Prayag

As the months fade away after the 4th African Astronomical Society (AfAS) conference in Morocco, the feelings of nostalgia and gratitude intensify. After travelling for around 36 hours to get there, I felt relieved by the warm air upon landing at Menara Airport in Marrakech on a Sunday evening, the day the conference officially started. I was fortunate to be lodged within walking distance of the welcoming Cadi Ayyad University, where the conference was held beyond a garden full of tangerine trees. It was also comforting to know, as a Francophone, that I could converse with the local students and organisers in another language besides English.

On the first day I attended, I was immediately blown away by the conference setup. During the whole week, there were two parallel sessions: one focused on science and the other on astronomy outreach and education. There was also an exhibition hall with posters and stands

where students, organizations, science clubs and individuals showcased their passion projects. From astronomy clubs to amateur astronomers sharing their art and captivating stories, and even samples of meteorites from Mars collected in the region, there was a wide array of fascinating displays. I spent most of my time on the science side, where astronomers from Africa and beyond presented their impressive research.

As expected, the presentations covered a wide range of topics, spanning all the different realms of astrophysics. I especially loved the exoplanetary science presentations as this topic, which is big in Morocco, somewhat inspired me to be in the astronomy field. I am very thankful to AfAS for giving me the opportunity to talk at the conference about my research on extragalactic radio pulsars and my experience at a previously held hackathon.



I cannot omit mentioning the stunning city of Marrakech. One might expect that after the conference talks, the city would slow down as night falls. Absolutely not the case in Marrakech. The city is bustling during the day and, seemingly, even more at night! The narrow, maze-like streets of the Medina are more alive than ever with locals, sellers, and tourists. The Jemaa el-Fnaa square, towered by the famous minaret of the Koutoubia Mosque, is jam-packed with life. It is definitely a sight to behold.

During one cosy late evening at that same square, the Jemaa el-Fnaa, AfAS organized a stargazing activity for the public. As with any previous stargazing activity I participated in, it is always humbling to interact with someone beaming with joy after seeing the craters on the Moon for the first time through a telescope. Outreach activities were held throughout the conference week, including school visits and public engagements, sometimes accompanied by a mobile planetarium operated by, if I recall correctly, a retired sports teacher who is extremely passionate about astronomy, inspiring current and future generations.

The conference ended with participants trading sun-soaked ochre rooftops for fresh green high-altitude pastures and snow-capped mountains,

taking a trip to the majestic Oukaimeden in the Atlas Mountains, at 2700m in altitude, where the Oukaimeden Observatory is located. The road there is winding, with scenic views over valleys and villages, and temperatures can drop to sub-zero, but it's all worth it. I felt the same excitement as I do whenever I visit the Sutherland telescope plateau in South Africa: thrilled to be there like a toddler on a Christmas morning. Seeing the famous TRAPPIST-North telescope dome, knowing of the great discoveries it has and continues to make, was the cherry on top.

The biggest takeaway from this conference, besides the science, was the people I encountered there. The warmth of the welcome, the attentive care provided, and the kindness shown at every stage were truly remarkable. I forged many friendships there which I hope will endure indefinitely. I learned a lot from them about various astronomy-related outreach efforts and research happening in Morocco, across Africa, and around the World. Meeting all these people, who are not necessarily academic researchers, reinforced the fact

that astronomy is one of the most accessible sciences; sometimes, one just needs to look up at the night sky.



# Giant Leap for African Astronomy: AfAS Granted Observer Status at UN COPUOS

## By Moleboge Lekoloane

The African Astronomical Society (AfAS) is thrilled to announce a monumental achievement for the African astronomy community. On June 28, 2024, the United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) granted AfAS provisional observer status. This marks a significant milestone for African astronomy, granting AfAS a vital platform to contribute to international discourse on space exploration and policy.

COPUOS is the United Nations's (UN) leading body for promoting international cooperation in the peaceful use of outer space. As a provisional observer, the AfAS gains a seat alongside representatives from member states and other established organizations. This allows AfAS to advocate for African astronomers' interests. The observer status also allows AfAS to champion issues critical to African astronomy, such as light pollution mitigation ("dark and quiet skies") initiatives and fostering astronomy education and research programs across the continent. Furthermore, AfAS can now participate in discussions that shape international policies governing space activities, ensuring Africa's voice is heard, and bringing unique views informed by the scientific strengths and challenges faced by astronomers in Africa.

Africa's geographical advantage, with some of the world's darkest skies, positions the continent as a prime location for astronomical observations and research. The continent is home to existing and upcoming astronomical infrastructures such as the High Energy Stereoscopic System (HESS) in Namibia, the Oukaïmeden Observatory in Morocco, the Kottamia Astronomical Observatory in Egypt, the Entoto Observatory Space Science Research Center in Ethiopia, the Hydrogen Epoch of Reionization Array (HERA), the MeerKAT radio

telescope, the mid-frequency component of the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) telescope, and the Southern African Large Telescope (SALT) in South Africa.

This provisional observer status is a springboard for AfAS to engage with a wider audience, raising awareness of African astronomy achievements and needs. AfAS can connect with other space agencies and organizations, fostering international partnerships and knowledge exchange. This is an opportunity for AfAS to leverage this platform to showcase the potential of African astronomy and attract more resources and investment to the continent.

The ultimate goal is to achieve permanent observer status at COPUOS which would solidify the AfAS's role and grant the society greater influence within the organization. To achieve this, AfAS would need to demonstrate its continued value and active participation as a provisional observer. The measure of the achievement will be active participation in COPUOS meetings and discussions. Thus AfAS should designate representatives to attend meetings, contribute meaningfully to conversations, and stay informed about current space policy issues. The representatives should actively seek partnerships with other Non-Governmental

Organizations (NGOs) such as the International Astronautical Federation, the European Astronomical Society, and space agencies to exchange knowledge, expertise, and resources. AfAS acknowledges the instrumental role of Moleboge Lekoloane, the stakeholder engagement officer, who has played a key role in securing this prestigious position for the African Astronomical Society. AfAS hopes to make the most of this opportunity and propel African astronomy vision.



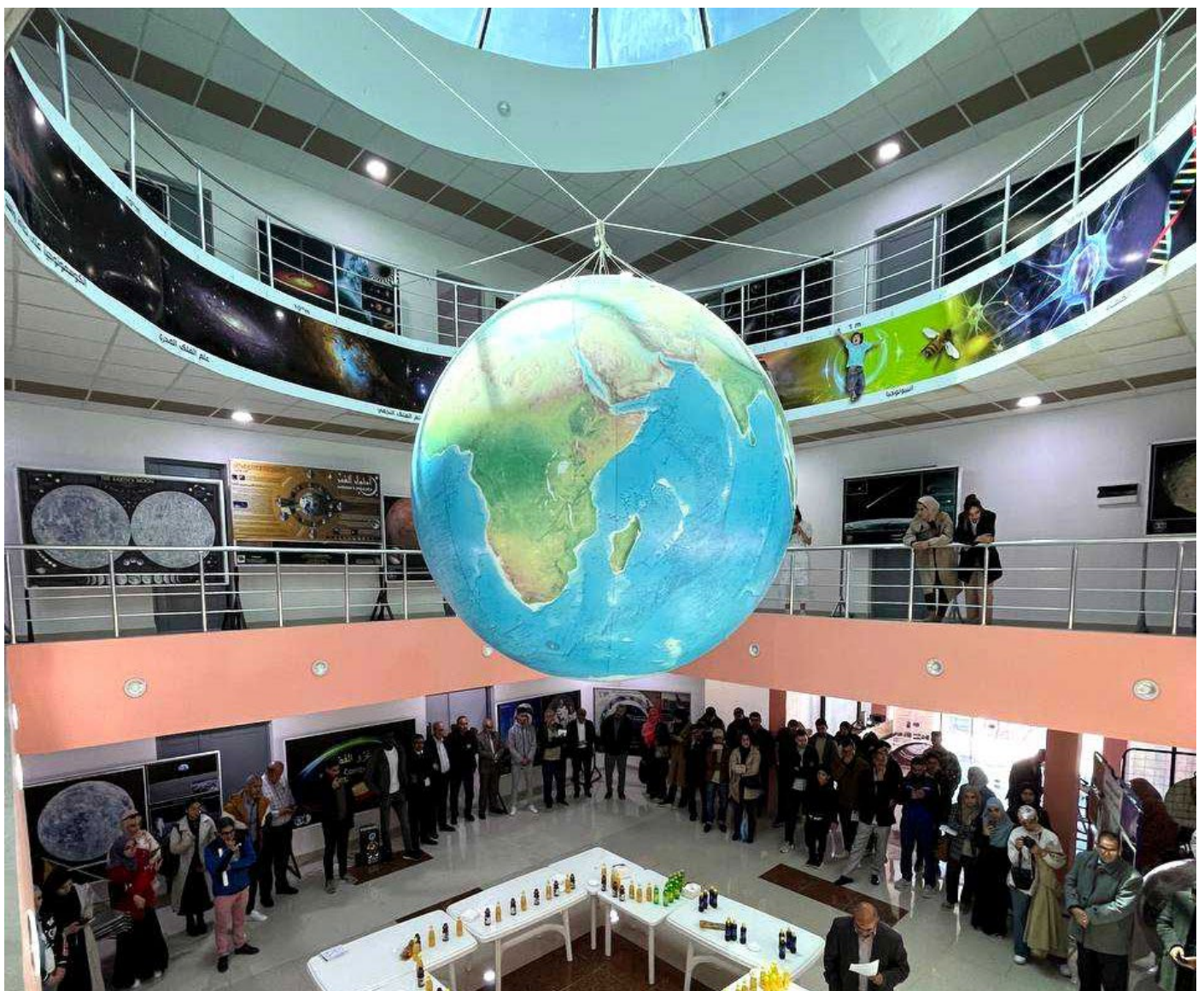
# Black Holes and Astronomical Culture at the Algerian Popular Astronomy Festival of Constantine (April 25-28, 2024)

By Jamal Mimouni

The 19th edition of the National Popular Astronomy Festival in Constantine, Algeria, concluded on 28 April 2024. Organized by the Sirius Astronomy Association and the Scientific Mediation Research Unit (CERIST), the four-day event (April 25-28) included associations from ten Algeria wilayas (provinces/states) and various regional countries. The festival drew a large crowd from Constantine and nearby areas, with special arrangements for hundreds of schoolchildren in particular those from underprivileged areas.

Sponsored by the International Astronomical Union (IAU) and supported by the African

Astronomical Society (AfAS) and the Arab Union for Astronomy and Space Sciences (AUASS), the festival's theme was "Black Holes: The Hidden Cosmic Beasts." The event featured extensive astronomy exhibitions, displays on black holes and the latest astronomical images. Visitors were afforded a unique opportunity to explore the Universe and make the enigmatic world of black holes more accessible, including those of the black hole at the center of our galaxy in polarized light. Various stands featured topics like geology, meteorites, and a Mars base project in Algeria's Brézina desert.



The festival catered to different audiences with lectures, workshops, and activities. Notable plenary speakers included Roger Davis, president of the European Astronomical Society (EAS), and Roger Ferlet, former president of the Société Astronomique de France (SAF). The event featured representatives from Jordan, Tunisia, Mauritania, Spain, and Iraq, with special recognition for the Tunisian City of Sciences and the Tunisian Astronomical Association (SAT). Algerian researchers from institutions like the Algerian Space Agency (ASAL) and the Research Center in Astronomy, Astrophysics, and Geophysics (CRAAG) also delivered well-received presentations.

The festival has been dubbed the largest amateur astronomy meeting in Africa and with thousands of visitors flocking to the venue, it has indeed lived up to this description.

The festival also produced a special edition of the Arabic science popularization magazine “Scientific Chiheb,” with half of the issue dedicated to black holes, and interviews from the black hole physics experts Jean Pierre Luminet and Professor Feryal Ozel.

In addition to the scientific program, participants enjoyed guided tours of Constantine’s historic sites, culminating in a sunset view from the “Monument to the Dead.” The closing ceremony featured performances by the renowned singer Abderahmane Bouhbila and his choir, along with a theatrical piece titled “Black Holes: These Hidden Beasts of Space-Time.” The ceremony concluded with the distribution of participation certificates and the exchange of gifts. Anticipation is already building for the 20th edition of the festival in 2025.



# IAU General Assembly 2024: Message to the African Astronomy Community

## By Kevin Govender

For years now we have spoken about the IAU General Assembly and invited all of you to contribute to the vision for this first of its kind on the African continent. From all informal accounts received thus far, I think we have succeeded in

our ambitions, with the African Astronomical Society now well positioned to build on the momentum generated and carry the legacy of this event forward.



### Some highlights from the IAU GA in brief:

The event was opened by the Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation, Dr Bonginkosi Emmanuel “Blade” Nzimande. Later, the Deputy Minister, Ms. Nomalungela Gina, addressed participants at the Gala Dinner.

This was the first ever open access IAU GA (sessions were streamed live on YouTube for free and are still available).

We successfully carried out the first ever hybrid poster session in a meeting of this sort, with 100 Raspberry Pis running with webcams on 40” screens, allowing poster presenters to be online on Zoom or in person.

The equipment will be donated to various schools and centres in underserved communities.

It was the first time any VR-compatible immersive platform (Spatial) was used for an IAU GA. This featured 15 custom Spatial spaces, including a Virtual Cosmic Echoes exhibition mirroring the physical exhibition.

For the first time ever we had a live radio broadcast (Radio Astro) for 8 hours per day on every day of the GA, using it also as a training platform for aspiring radio journalists, and generating content for community radio stations globally to use for free.

Yet another first was the establishment of an African craft market within the venue itself, engaging local small business and allowing participants to meet and support South African entrepreneurs.

The conference provided free child care at the venue for all participants who wished to make use of it, in partnership with a local school. In partnership with Wesgro (part of local government) there was a Space Industry networking reception which brought together local tech companies involved in the Space sector together with international organisations attending the GA such as NASA, NAOJ, ESA, etc.

A Special Breakfast Briefing was held as a cultivation event with funding prospects to discuss the future of African astronomy and sponsored by the British High Commission. High profile speakers included Nobel Prize Winner Prof Brian Schmidt; the first African American Woman in Space Dr Mae Jemison; and the first African American Woman to Pilot a Spacecraft Dr Sian Proctor.

In celebration of Women's Day on 9th August, we had a live link to the International Space Station where school learners got to speak to astronaut Sunita Willams, while having both Dr Mae Jemison and Dr Sian Proctor in the room.

The extensive programme of social events ensured that participants were exposed to African culture (not just South Africa) as well as what can only be described as the humanity of scientists. This human touch was a highlight mentioned by many participants.

Numbers are still being checked but in the end we had 2648 participants (2045 in person and 603 virtual) from 107 countries, with 647 of these students (500 in person and 147 virtual). 911 grants were awarded with significant African participation achieved. There were 211 science sessions (including plenaries) and 16 poster sessions (all hybrid) plus many social and side events including 16 online-first. There were 20 sponsors and 43 exhibitors. The immersive platform Spatial had over 4200 views, and there were over 1100 active members on Slack with 21733 messages sent throughout the event.

The open access streams on YouTube had 20.2k views and 374 subscribers. There were 8.2k unique viewers and over 300 returning viewers. Media coverage was extensive with

media monitoring services reporting total media circulation of 87,993,115. The extensive outreach and education activities during the GA reached around 28,000 school learners, 85 educators and around 3,800 general public.

I could not be more proud of [our incredible team](#) who have worked so hard but always with such passion, friendliness and a steadfast dedication to serve both the participants and the various communities we impacted.

They deserve all credit for pulling this off. As I wrote to the conference participants, we had always wanted to use the first GA on the continent to do more than any other science meeting. We wanted it to make an impact, to showcase our scientific and technological abilities and to change how the world saw Africa. We pushed ourselves to innovate, to dream big, and to deliver. Our guiding quote through many really challenging times was Nelson Mandela's "it always seems impossible until it is done". The very positive outcome of this GA – with all the daring innovations, principled decisions and calculated risks coming to fruition – did most certainly seem impossible at many points along the way. But the team persevered, and now it is done! I hope we have served the community well.

More information will continue to be posted on the conference website ([www.astronomy2024.org](http://www.astronomy2024.org)) which will live on with info about proceedings, legacy, pictures, recordings of the live streams, etc but I'd like to specifically draw your attention to [this collection of amazing photos](#) from our photographer Bradley Urion who I think did an amazing job of capturing GA memories. A side note: For me this has been a very significant life event, both professionally and personally. I have tried to document my own thoughts containing some of the history and context leading up to this GA; some specific acknowledgements for the many people involved along the way; and some deeply personal reflections regarding my own family, especially the connection between this GA and my wife Dr Carolina Ödman. If you are interested in that (very personal) side of the GA, you can find it [here](#).

Thank you once again for all the support along the way and I hope we can build on this momentum to take astronomy in Africa forward.

# NEW STAFF INTRODUCTION

Moloko Makwetja



We are delighted to introduce Moloko Makwetja as the new junior education, outreach, and communications officer at the AfAS Secretariat. Moloko will assist in several roles including outreach and education, constitution review, fundraising and the executive committees, as well as the African Planetarium Association (APA). He is joining us through the 3-year South African Radio Astronomy Observatory (NRF/SARAO) Graduate-in-Training Programme. He holds a Honours degree in Physics and a BSc in Mathematics and Physics from the University of Venda. Let's extend a warm welcome and support him as he embarks on this exciting journey with us.

Ahmien van der Walt



Ahmien van der Walt is a respected figure in fundraising and philanthropy with a background in the arts, culture, heritage and higher education landscape. He currently serves as a fundraiser for the African Astronomical Society and is pursuing a Postgraduate Diploma in Philanthropy and Resource Mobilisation at Wits Business School. Ahmien is known for his advocacy in the creative arts sector and community initiatives, recognised for his contributions with accolades such as being named one of Mail & Guardian's 200 Young South Africans in 2014. His dedication to driving positive change and empowering communities through education, culture, and innovation make him a transformative leader in the philanthropic community.