

First human fell from the sky ... and other stories from indigenous groups

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Image 1. The Canadian sky at dusk. Indigenous people around the world looked to the stars and told stories about them. Photo by: Christie Taylor/Science Friday

It's a cold night in early May on the shore of Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba, Canada, and the stars are coming out. Wilfred Buck is telling the stories behind the constellations.

"Right below the grandmother spider is the Pleiades, the Seven Sisters," said Buck. "And that's called Pakone Kisik. The hole in the sky. And the hole in the sky is where we come from."

Buck is Cree, also known as Ininew, one of Canada's largest First Nations indigenous groups. He's telling stories he has gathered from indigenous communities across Manitoba. One tells how the Star Woman saw Earth from another dimension, fell through the hole in the sky and became the first human on this planet.

"We come from the stars," Buck said.

Many people are more familiar with constellation myths of Greek or Roman origin. They've heard about Andromeda chained to a rock or Hercules slaying a lion. However, just as the people of early

Western civilizations looked to the stars and told stories about them, so did indigenous people around the world. In North American communities, the stars are home to bears, thunderbirds and more.

Stories Helped Make Sense Of Their World

Some of those stories are part of how indigenous people made sense of the world around them. It's a form of science separate from, but related to, the observation, prediction and questioning of what we call the scientific method.

Buck connects the two. He works to reintroduce indigenous stories and traditions to Cree and other indigenous communities.

Part of that effort is Tipis and Telescopes, a gathering of indigenous teachers and local youth community leaders. It's a weekend of stories, astronomy and ceremony. Buck relays star teachings and tales of science. He talks about the tilt of the Earth, the Northern Lights and the odd path Mars takes through the night sky.



"Because Earth orbits the sun faster than Mars, at certain times Earth passes Mars," and it looks as if Mars does a circle in the sky, Buck said. A name for it is "mooswa acak," which means moose spirit, he said. It came about "because when a moose is startled, it'll run in a big, huge circle, and then continue on its way."

In Ottawa, the Canada Science and Technology Museum has a space exhibit with more star stories.

On the "One Sky, Many Astronomies" display are Greek and Roman constellations in light colors. Then the constellations of Canada's indigenous cultures are painted brightly on top of them. There are loon birds, thunderbirds, the hole in the sky and Mista Muskwa, the bear that sits atop the stars many know as the Big Dipper. Buck's voice comes out of a headset, telling the story of the bear.

A New Relationship

In 2008, Canada began a major effort to right the wrongs of colonization. The process aimed to recognize the rights of indigenous groups and shape a new relationship of respect. At the museum, this meant including indigenous culture and technology in the story of Canadian science.

The museum brought in Buck as a co-curator, along with indigenous astronomer Annette Lee. She is Dakota/Lakota and Ojibway.

Visitors to the museum included a group of students from nearby Gloucester High School. They're indigenous, including Jessie Kavanaugh, who is Anishinaabe, from a First Nation called Animakee Wa Zhing in Ontario.

At the museum, they explored the constellations, rotating the images of the sky to see the arrangement of stars on the day and time they were born. Animals roll in and out of the frame, including a turtle, a spider, a thunderbird and Mista Muskwa the bear.

However, Kavanaugh said the stories aren't ones she learned growing up.

"I'm 18 and I'm learning this now and I still don't know anything about it," Kavanaugh said. "I feel like I know more about the Greek or Roman, their constellations, than I do my own."

Difficulty In Gathering Star Stories

Buck said this is common in indigenous communities. They have lost stories of the stars and other knowledge. It's a direct result of the ways in which colonizing Europeans killed indigenous people and weakened links to their culture. After more than 14 years of collecting star stories from indigenous elders around Manitoba, Buck said he's managed to gather only two dozen.

Jordyn Hendricks, another student at the museum, is Métis from Red River Nation. He said that recognizing the work of indigenous people in science and technology matters for its own sake.

"We're seen as primitive or not super smart. But we were super smart," Hendricks said. "And it's important to bring that in and recognize it."

