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Astronomy Lesson 1: One Sky, Many Stories

THE FIXED STAR (BLACKFEET NATION)

NOTE: Story citation: "They Dance in the Sky: Native American Star Myths" by Jean Guard Monroe and Ray A. Williamson (1987)

One summer night in Montana, two sisters decided to sleep outside their lodge. The sky was clear and there was a warm breeze; the young women went to sleep quickly. Before dawn, both of them awoke and gazed at the beautiful night sky and early morning stars. Looking toward the East, one girl pointed out Morning Star to her sister. "That star is so beautiful. He is winking at me. How happy I would be to have him for a husband."

As the sun came up and the day broadened, the tasks of the day soon grew upon them, and both young women forgot the night's talk.

Several days later, the sisters walked out to gather firewood. They picked up sticks, made up their packs, and tied them on their backs with strong leather straps. They were cheerful and chatted happily as they went. Soon the strap on one of the bundles broke. It was that of the girl who wished for Morning Star. Each time she re-tied her bundle, the strap broke again. Her sister said, "I'll go on ahead. After I unload my firewood, I'll come back and help you."

The first girl kept trying to fix her bundle of firewood. Finally she decided to wait for her sister. When she looked up from her task, she found a handsome young man watching her. He was dressed all in fine beaver skins and wore a tall eagle feather in his hair. The young woman started to hurry away but he stopped her. "What do you want of me?" she asked him.

"You said you wanted me for your husband, and here I am," he replied.

"You are a stranger to me. Why would I want you for a husband?" She asked, startled. "I don't even know you."

The young man laughed and replied, "One night you looked at me in the sky and said you wished to have me as your husband. I am Morning Star. I have come to take you as my wife." The next moment, the handsome youth gently took her hand. They smiled at each other as he removed the feather from his hair. "Shut your eyes," he told her and placed the feather in her hair. They rose up into the sky.

When the young maiden opened her eyes, she was in the house of Sun and Moon, the youth's mother and father. She was not afraid, but she did feel a little confused because she had seen no place like this before. "Come and meet my wife," Morning Star called to his parents. "Make her feel at home in Sky Country."

Moon fed the girl four berries and a little water in a shell. The four berries, one for each direction, symbolized all the food in the world, and the water in the shell represented all the water in the oceans. She could not finish her meal.

After she had eaten, Moon took her aside and said, "I have something special for you." She gave her a root-digger and showed her how to gather roots, warning her not to touch a certain turnip. "This turnip is special to the Gods. It is a sacred turnip," Moon explained. "Evil will come to us all if it is touched."

Now, this turnip was very large, and the young woman often looked at it when she was out digging for roots. She wondered, "What would happen to me if I dug that turnip up? Why is it so special?"

Many happy days came and went for the young woman and Morning Star. After a while, she gave birth to a baby. Each day she went out to gather vegetables for the evening meal. Each day her curiosity and desire to dig up the turnip increased. One day she sat the baby outside to play and decided to go out alone and dig up the turnip. The turnip was big and the earth was hard. Her root-digger got stuck in the ground. She grew afraid and tried to pull it out, but it would not budge. She sat down and started to cry.

Crane Man and Crane Woman were flying overhead and

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heard her crying. When she saw them, she prayed to them, "Please help me."

Crane Woman said, "I have been a good and faithful wife, so I have much power to help you. Your mother-in-law gave you the root digger. I will teach you the songs that go with it. They are special and will help you." Crane Woman burned incense and sang. Soon she pulled out the root-digger and, dancing around the turnip, made three thrusts with the digger. With the fourth try, she pulled out the turnip. "Take your root-digger and your turnip home," Crane Woman said.

As she was leaving, Morning Star's wife looked at the hole Crane Woman had left when she pulled out the big turnip. She thought she could see something moving and looked a little closer. "I can see my people and my old camp," she thought. She felt sad to see everyone down there working so hard while she was happy and living at ease in Sky Country. It was the first time the young woman had been sad during her stay in Sky Country, the first time she had missed her people.

Morning Star and Sun and Moon were extremely unhappy when they saw what she had done. They asked her if she had seen anything when she pulled out the turnip. "I saw the camp and hunting grounds of my people," she replied.

Morning Star shook his head and told her that she would have to take the baby and go back to the Blackfeet people. "It was wrong to dig up the sacred turnip. Sorrow has come to Sky Country. I cannot keep you now," he said. "When you return to your people, do not let our baby touch the ground for fourteen days. If he does, he will turn into a puffball and return to me. Then he will become a star."

The woman did not want to leave her husband, but she longed for her own people more. Sun called an old man to help return the woman to her people. The man brought a strong spider web. "I will tie you and your son to one end and let you down through the hole in the sky," he told her. So the old man let her down the turnip hole and right into her own camp.

"Here is the woman who went to the sky," some boys called when they saw her. "She has come back." Soon the whole camp came out to greet her and look at her baby.

Before the woman left Sky Country, Morning Star had told her to paint a morning star symbol on the back of her lodge so she would remember her mistake in digging up the turnip and not make another mistake and let the baby touch the ground. She did this and watched the baby very carefully for thirteen days.

On the fourteenth day, the woman's mother said, "I am tired. Will you go get water for our lodge? I will watch the baby." The young woman agreed but warned her mother against letting the baby touch the ground -- although she did not tell her why. The grandmother left the baby on the pallet a few feet away and was humming and doing beadwork in the sunlight. Now, the baby had just learned to crawl and wanted to play in the sunlight. He very quietly crawled off the pallet. Just as he touched the earth, he turned into a puffball and got tangled in a robe. The grandmother turned around and saw the bundle squirming. "He is asleep," she thought happily.

Soon the mother came back. "Where is my baby?" she asked.

"I just checked him. He is asleep in the robe," the grandmother answered.

The mother turned to pick up her son. In his place she found only a puffball.

That night a bright new star shone in the sky. The puffball had risen and stuck in the hole in the sky where the woman dug up the turnip. This is why that one star never moves. The Blackfoot call it Fixed Star.

The grief-stricken woman went home and painted circles all along the bottom of her lodge to represent the puffball her son had become.

KEYWORDS: *Moon, Sun, Root-Digger, Incense, Star, Beadwork, Fixed Star (North Star/Polaris)*