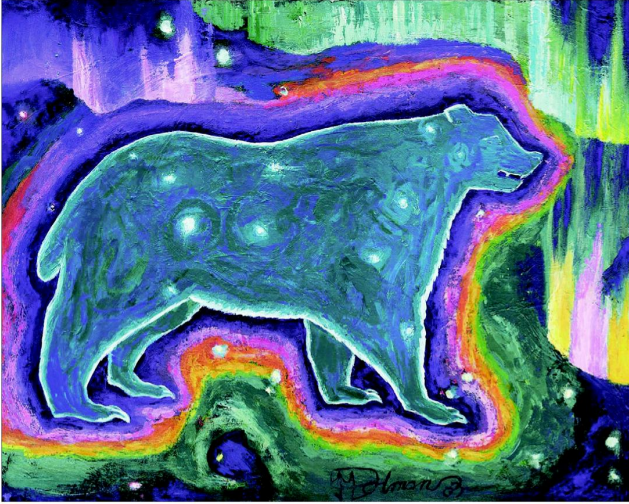


Feature Articles

Aboriginal Canadian Sky Lore of the Big Dipper

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The Big Dipper stars were associated with a Great Bear in many Canadian First Nations legends. This painting "Ursa Major" is by Yukon, artist Mary Dolman, and is used with permission.

Introduction

Spring constellations in Canadian skies include the familiar Big Dipper group of bright stars in the constellation known as Ursa Major. This star group was well known in various cultures and peoples around the northern hemisphere. Aboriginal North Americans also recognized the star group, and several interesting interpretations and legends related to the Big Dipper stars were known to the early inhabitants of Canada.

Mythologies of indigenous peoples served various purposes including explaining and educating about the natural cycles of life and death, the cosmos, and other natural phenomena, as well as instructing tribal standards and customs by which to act and live. The mythologies associated with constellations were important because they emphasized participation with nature for the mutual benefit of all living things, and the mythologies provided a cultural and social context for the timekeeping and calendar functions of constellation knowledge, which were of agricultural and ritual importance.

An examination of Canadian aboriginal interpretations of the Big Dipper star group reveals some similarities that

coincide with regional geography and climate features, as well as with language similarities.

Language Groups of First Nations in Canada

Several main language groups defined similar cultures. In eastern Canada, the geographic region that could be generally referred to as the eastern woodlands was mostly dominated by the Algonquian language group, and this language group included native groups across the subarctic and westward across the northern Great Plains to the Rocky Mountains. Another language group was the Iroquoian group, which included groups in locations in southwestern Ontario but mainly in the region south of Lake Ontario. The Siouan language group included the Assiniboin peoples of the northern Prairies. Other language groups that influenced native mythology of constellations in Canada included the Eskimo-Aleut language group of northern regions, the Salish language group of the central regions of British Columbia, and the Athabaskan group of languages found in First Nations of various regions of western Canada.

Some Legends of the Big Dipper Stars

The most common legend explaining the origin of the stars of the Big Dipper is the celestial bear hunt. A legend of the Mi'kmaq, a group indigenous to the Atlantic Provinces, was common to many regions of Canada as well as North America. In the Mi'kmaq legend, birds are the main characters that hunt the bear, while humans feature in most other legends. (Various regional interpretations can be found in Clark 1960; Miller 1997; Rockwell 1991; Monroe and Williamson 1987; and Bastion and Mitchell 2004.) This legend begins with the bear waking in late spring after a long hibernation and emerging from her den to look for food. The bear is spotted by Chickadee, who decides to hunt the bear but is too small to hunt the bear alone. Chickadee calls other hunters to help with the chase. Six other hunters join in the chase, including Robin, Moosebird (or Gray Jay), Pigeon, Blue Jay, Barred Owl, and smaller Saw-whet Owl. Barred Owl is the star known as Arcturus, and Blue Jay and Pigeon are several of the stars between Arcturus and the handle stars of the Big Dipper. The handle stars represent the hunters as Robin, closest to the bear, Chickadee in the middle, carrying a pot (the star known as Alcor) for cooking the bear, and Moosebird farthest from the bear. After the long and lean

winter, the hunters are all eager for the meat and fat of the bear and so they pursue the bear all summer long across the northern sky. By autumn, the trailing hunters begin to lose the trail and gradually drop out of the hunt, leaving only Robin, Chickadee and Moosebird to continue the hunt. Eventually, during mid-autumn, the three hunters overtake the bear, the bear becomes angry, rears up on her hind legs in the west, and Robin shoots her with an arrow. The bear's blood spatters all over Robin, who then flies up to a nearby maple tree and shakes off most of the blood, except for a spot of red that remains on Robin's breast. The blood causes the leaves of the maples to turn red and eventually fall from the trees, and the bear's white fat eventually covers the land as snow. Meanwhile, the skeleton of the bear lies on its back low in the northern sky, and the life spirit of the bear returns to the bear's den (represented by the constellation known as Corona Borealis) to occupy the bear sleeping in the den. The following spring, the bear will emerge from her den, and the cycle repeats.

A variation is the legend of the Fox peoples (in the vicinity of southern Michigan), in which three hunters set out chasing the bear first toward the north, then toward the east, and then toward the west, and end up following the bear into the sky before they realize that it is too late to return to Earth, and so the three hunters perpetually chase the bear around the sky (Bastion and Mitchell 2004).

Legends of the Iroquois peoples were generally similar in reference to hunters chasing the great bear, and the Big Dipper was *Nya-gwa-ih*, or the Celestial Bear. In one legend (Miller 1997), three hunters and their dog came tantalizingly close to killing the bear but the bear always outran them. They vowed to never stop until they overtook and killed the bear. The bear led them far to the north and into the sky, where they can be seen as the three handle stars with the dog near the middle star, and the bear as the bowl stars of the dipper.

Another theme that recurs in various mythologies is the general theme of seven children, fleeing from some form of harmful pursuers, who escape into the sky to become the Big Dipper stars. The Blackfoot legend (from the northern Great Plains region) involves seven brothers and their sister. A woman changed into a bear and chased seven brothers and their sister into a tree. (The reason is a long story with no significant relevance to the stars and constellations but more details can be found in Wissler and Duvall 1995.) One of the brothers waved his medicine feather and they all escaped to the sky and became the Big Dipper star group, and the sister became the star that we call Alcor. The "Last Brother" was the star at the end of the handle of the dipper, and the Blackfoot peoples used the position of the Last Brother relative to the bowl stars to mark the time.

A legend of the Assiniboin peoples (in the vicinity of Lake Winnipeg) also referred to seven children (six brothers and a sister) chased by a woman trying to kill them, and who escaped into the sky and became the Big Dipper (Miller 1997).

In a similar legend of the Cheyenne (who moved from the region west of the Great Lakes westward to the Great Plains), seven brothers and their adopted sister, Quillwork Girl, were pursued by a thundering herd of bison who wanted to take Quillwork Girl for themselves. The brothers and adopted sister scrambled up into a tree. The youngest brother had special powers and made the tree grow larger and taller, and they all climbed into the sky just as the angry bison forced the tree to fall. The brothers and sister are visible as the stars of the Big Dipper. Quillwork girl is the brightest star and she is decorating the sky with her patterns and designs. (Miller 1997)

A legend from the Penobscot peoples (in the St. Lawrence valley region) was different from the Mi'kmaq legend but strikingly similar to the Blackfoot legend. In the Penobscot legend, six brothers went out on a trip and their older sister became a bear that killed everyone in the village except for the two youngest children. When the six brothers returned, they were all able to escape into the sky and became the Big Dipper (Miller 1997).

A significantly different legend for the Big Dipper stars evolved for the eastern Cree, Ojibway, and Menominee peoples north of the St. Lawrence valley and near the central Great Lakes region. They saw the Big Dipper stars as *Ojeeg annung*, the Fisher, and so this legend could refer to the "Fisher Stars" rather than the "Big Dipper" stars. The legend features a young boy crying because there is no summer, and so the people of the north country hold a council and decide to go and secure the summer for the north country. After a long journey to a remote island, they eventually reach a long wigwam and find that summer is contained there in the form of the Birds of Summer. Several of the summer creatures are assigned to guard the Birds of Summer but after a plan has been worked out to steal the summer, and after some conflict (with many details not significantly related to constellations), the people of the north country escape with the Birds of Summer and with the guards in pursuit. The north-country people send Otter and Fisher to distract the pursuers, and Fisher gets shot in the tail with an arrow, runs up a tree to escape, and eventually leaps into the sky. Eventually the summer and winter creatures agreed to share the summer. Meanwhile, Fisher can be seen every night as a hero who helped to secure summer for the north country (with an arrow still in his tail) (Miller 1997 and Virtual Museum of Canada).

Several other interpretations of the Big Dipper stars included giant caribou as seen by the Polar Inuit (with some legends including three wolves pursuing the caribou), and diving loons as seen by the Klamath peoples (in the British Columbia plateau region). To the Tahltan peoples in northwestern British Columbia, the stars of the Big Dipper were the Grandfather Stars. Grandfather Stars told the Tahltan people that as long as he continued to go around the northern sky, everything would be well. The Ntlakypamuk, or Thompson, peoples in the southern British Columbia Interior region saw three hunters (in the handle of the dipper) pursuing a grizzly bear.