

Atchakosuk: Ininewuk Stories of the Stars

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The following article will explore *atchakosuk* – the spirit lights up above. Ininewuk (Cree) mythology posits that constellations and stars that are prominent in the northern skies are understood through perspectives that are unique to the Ininewuk. For First Nations students and Ininewuk students in particular, it is important that the ancestral worldviews related to science are reflected in First Nations education in as prevalent a manner as those associated with Greek and Roman mythology. It should be known that many people under the stars have their own interpretations and understandings of constellations and the stories associated with them. The Knowledge Keepers, Medicine People and honoured Elders that have graced us with these understandings are from many nations as far away as South America and as close as our home communities. I have chosen to deal specifically with the Ininewuk perspectives of astronomy for this is where my path began. The subject matter contained herein is intended to provide students and educators associated with First Nations Education with an introduction to Ininewuk perspectives of astronomy. In this article, the Ininewuk language is in the Swampy Cree dialect.

INTRODUCTION

All cultures on Mother Earth have their own understandings of the stars. No matter where one was located on Earth, all one has to do was look up into an evening sky and a myriad of stories can be revealed. As human beings made sense of their world and established a sense of belonging, stories were told and connections between people and the environment were established. For the Ininewuk, this process precipitated the belief that all people belong in the vastness of Creation. The knowledge that has been gained has influenced our lives and helped us find direction and understandings.

Having attended school in northern Manitoba, I heard of stories and learned names for prominent stars and constellations in our northern skies. The Great Bear, Ursa Major immediately summons the distinctive shape of the Big Dipper. The only trouble I had with this characterization was that this bear had a long tail, as did the Little Bear, Ursa Minor. The only bears I ever saw in Northern Manitoba were the North American Black Bear and, from

what I could see, it had a stub for a tail. This contradiction allowed me to become critical of mainstream understanding of the heavens.

The beauty and marvel that presented itself every time I looked into the vast night sky inspired me to wonder about stories of *Wesakaychak* – the Trickster – a person who was central to many of the stories of the Ininewuk people. One such story was that of the Northern Lights. As young people, we were told never to whistle at the Northern Lights because if we did, the spirits associated with these lights would come and take us away. Of course we had to test the validity of this warning. When we whistled, the lights moved, which inspired us to run and hide. This was the extent of my exploration of the cosmos during my early childhood.

It was not until I became an educator that I renewed my interest in the heavens. I came across an *atayokewina* (sacred stories) about the constellation popularly known as the Big Dipper. The story teller, late Murdo Scribe called this constellation *Ochekatchakosuk* – the Fisher stars. This story spoke of how, at some point in the distant past, there was no summer in this part of the world. What may be interesting to note regarding this story is that the reference to no summer could be connected to a time of cold (the Ice Age); a notion that is kept alive through this story. This story goes on to say that certain animals were selected to bring summer to the northern hemisphere. The animal that succeeded in this task (with help from other animals) was *Ochek* – the Fisher. To honour the success of this great task, the Creator placed the Fisher in the sky to remind us of what *was* then, what *is* now, as well as the possibility of *what could be again* if we do not respect what is loaned to us.

From this story, interest was sparked within me and a small fire of wonder was reborn. I began to search for more knowledge about the skies and about Ininew knowledge concerning the skies. Thus this narrative is an Ininew perspective of First Nations Astronomy. In the process of this work I came across some research regarding traditional stories and names of stars and constellations from an Anishinabe (Ojibway) perspective.

Our Elders believe that what is above is mirrored below and this is our connection with *misewa* – all that is. There are stories and teachings that are known and stories and teachings yet to be found. What is presented here is but a glimpse of the traditional knowledge that is known and held by indigenous people throughout the world. Here are some stories of *Keesik Aski* – the sky world. As one Elder stated, “we are blessed to live under a blanket of stars”.

We as individuals tend to view our civilization as “the best” and when our teachings, knowledge, and belief systems are ridiculed, marginalized and then utterly dismissed as “quaint”, we begin to question our world view. This has happened and is still happening to First Nations people as well as all colonized peoples. Until other world views are proposed and considered, there will be a distinct “difference” and “quaintness” about all that is not mainstream. In addition, our children will see these differences and attempt to discard them in order to become more mainstream. These teachings reflect the differences and propose another perspective, broadening and giving voice to them.

The implications for the educational systems (public schools and federally funded Band operated schools) in which are children are indoctrinated, is that it recognizes the “otherness”, and becomes a part of our multicultural nation.

ATIMA ATCHAKOSUK: THE DOG STARS

This story concerns the seven stars of the constellation commonly known as the Little Dipper. One of the stars that comprise the Little Dipper is Polaris, sometimes referred to as the North Star. In the Ininew language, Polaris is often called *Keewatin Atchakos* – the going home star. In the story associated with Atima Atchakosuk, Polaris is called *Mahkan Atchakos*, the Wolf Star, and collectively the seven stars that make up the little dipper are called Atima Atchakosuk, the Dog Stars (Figure 1). This is how dogs came to the people.

Long ago, the people had no dogs. There was no companion for a lonely child or help for the Elders on long forced marches to new campsites in search of food during times of famine. The people were always surprised when visitors, raiders, and marauding animals entered their camps; they had no warning system that would tell them when danger was near. Our *natootim-uk*, our relatives; the Wolf, Coyote and Fox saw this and were concerned. The wolves held a council and it was decided that they would send two of their own to live with the people. The council of Coyotes and council of Foxes also decided this same action. Two pups from each of the councils were sent to all the four directions of humankind. They came, adapted, changed and flourished. From these gifts came all the dogs that now inhabit the world. These dogs now guard our homes, communities, camps, and loved ones.

To honour this sacrifice made by our *natootim-uk*, the Creator placed a

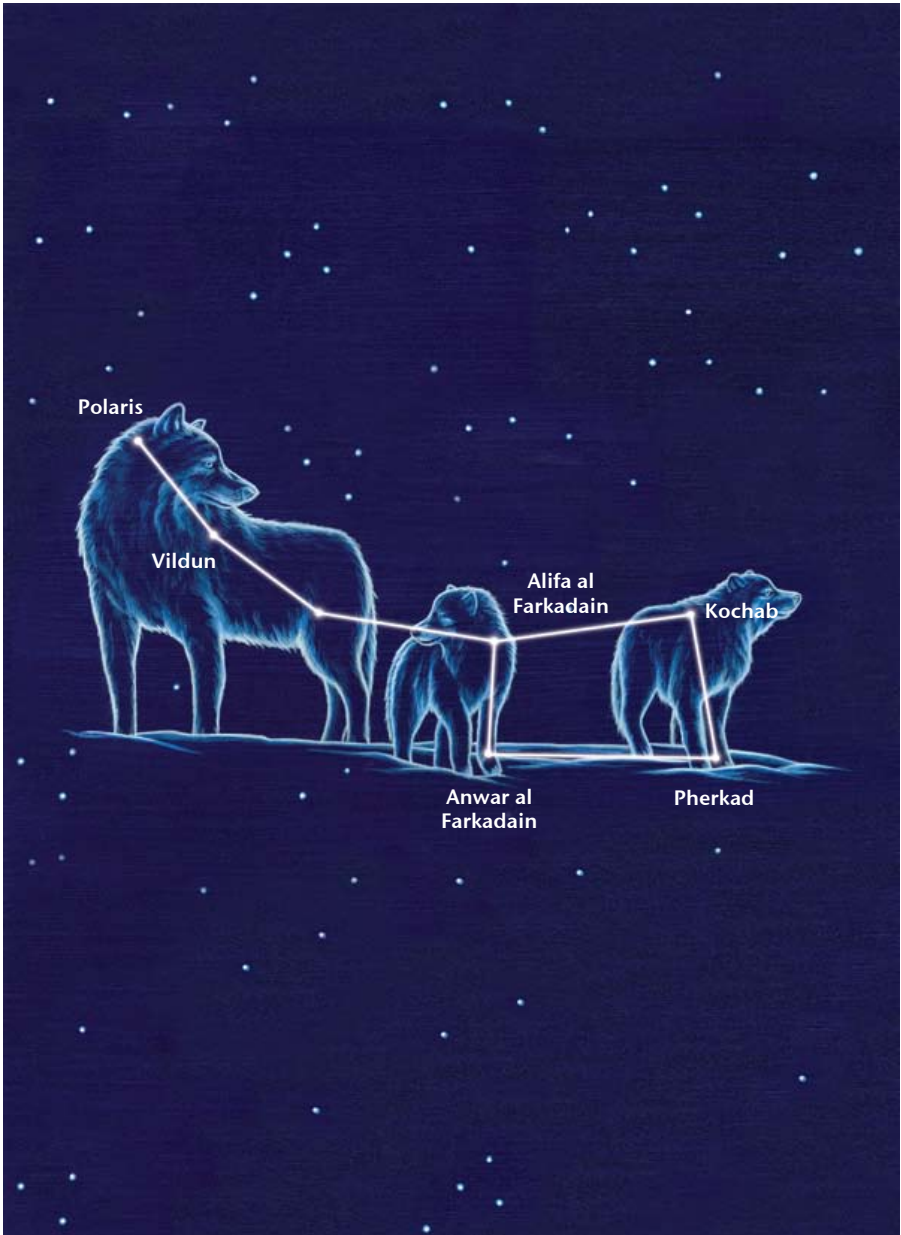


Figure 1: *Atima Atchakosuk (The Dog Stars)*, popularly known as *Ursa Minor*, reminds us how the domestic dog came into being.

reminder in the heavens (little dipper) of the dog, which would forever be a guardian for humans. Polaris anchors the dogs' leash as the dog runs around the circumference of the sky-camp, alert and ever on guard. Some say that the famous Dog Soldiers Society of the Cheyenne People was given a dream by these protectors and from this dream they were shown instructions on how to protect the people when danger was imminent.

The stars of this constellation, particularly those on the "handle" of the little dipper, represent the Wolf (Polaris), the Coyote (Yildun or Delta) and the Fox (Epsilon); the four bowl stars represent the pups that were sent to the four directions of humankind.

KEEWATIN: THE GOING HOME STAR

Keewatin, the Going Home Star, is commonly known as Polaris, or the North Star. This star also represents the northern direction and *keewatinook* – the north winds. It is an important star for people who live under the *Ahkoop Atchakosuk*, or blanket of stars. Being above the northern axis of the earth, Keewatin seems to remain stationary in the northern sky. First Nations people who used this star as a night guide realized its stationary nature. If First Nations people kept Keewatin on their right shoulder while travelling at night, they knew they were traveling in a westerly direction; this knowledge could be applied to whatever direction these travelers wanted to go. The Plains Cree called this star *Ekakatchet Atchakos*, the standing still star, as this star stood still while all the other stars danced around it. Keewatin is also known as the altar for the sweat lodge ceremony.

MISTA MUSKWA: THE BIG BEAR

This story concerns the attention earned by bullies and abusers of power. *Kayas* - long ago - there was a huge bear that roamed over the lands. Similar to the story of *Ochekatchakosuk*, it may be interesting to note that the story of *Mista Muskwa* can be based on historic fact in that huge bears did roam North America such as the Prairie Grizzly and the Short-Faced Bear during the last Ice Age. All beings were afraid of these bears because they were big, mean and powerful. They did what they wanted to do when they wanted to do it. They wrecked homes, destroyed winter food caches, scared game, ripped up edible plants and killed all who stood in their way. This went on for many years.

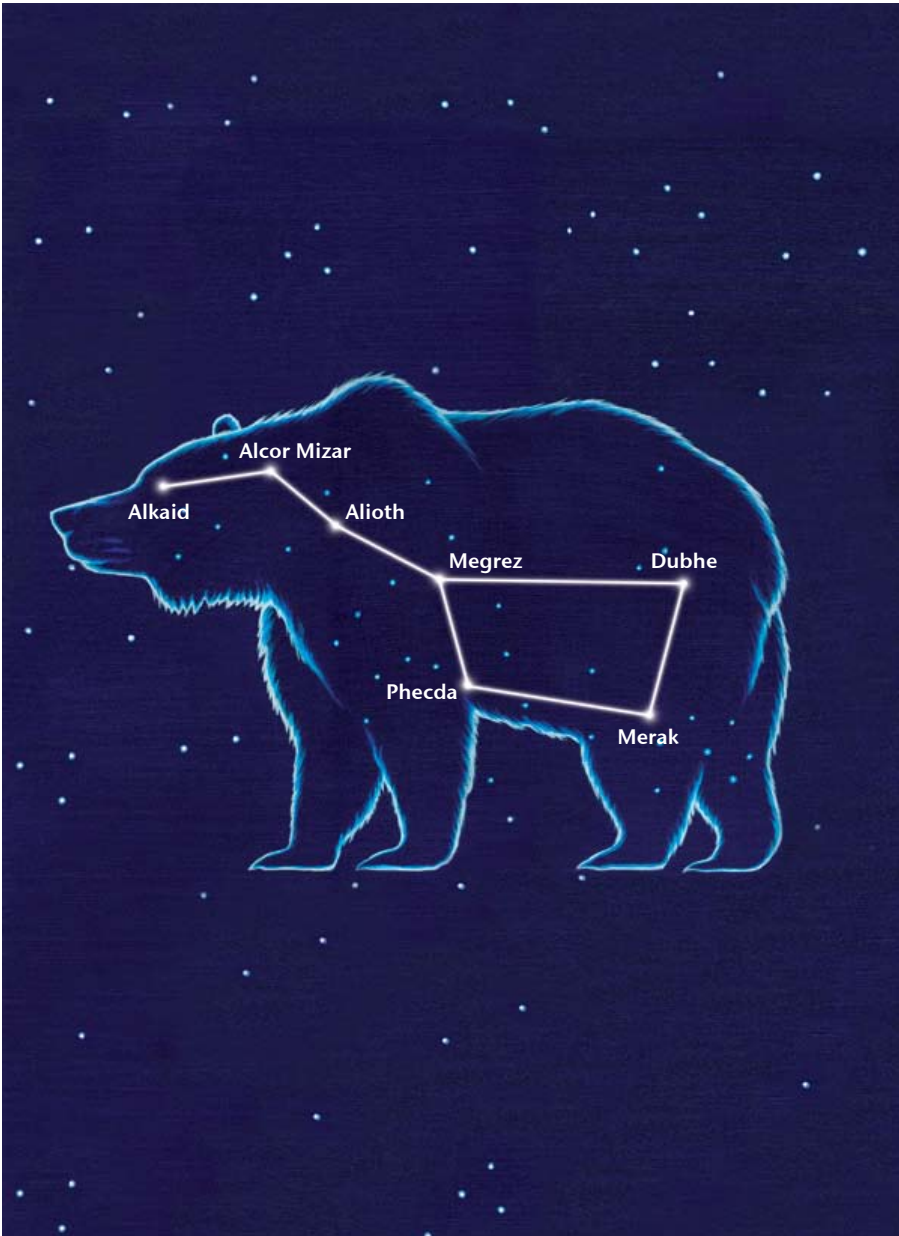


Figure 2: Mista Muskwa (The Big Bear) reminds us of how bullies behave and why certain plants change colour in the autumn.

One day, some fed-up animals decided to hold a meeting and discuss what could be done about this situation. A meeting was called and almost all of the animals showed up, because they all felt that the situation with the bear was unacceptable.

After great outcries and stories of horror and tragedy, it was decided that the bear had to be removed from their traditional lands. At various times, the beings of the land tried to reason and calm the bear, but to no avail. The bear always did what it wanted to do and continued to damage property and hurt or kill others. Thus, it was decided that seven of the best trackers and hunters were chosen to remove the bear. It just so happened that the seven best trackers and hunters were birds and off they flew. The hunt was on as *Tehpakoop Pinesisuk* the Seven Birds (Figure 3), chased Mista Muskwa.

Not all beings were put off by the activities of the bear. The ravens found that they could have a comfortable, well-fed life if they just followed the bear around and feed on its left-overs. When they heard about what was to happen to the bear, the ravens went straight to Mista Muskwa and told him. He was outraged and set immediately out to find these “great hunters”. So it was that around the 11th and 12th full moons of the year, a confrontation between Mista Muskwa and the hunters occurred. This confrontation was brief and did not lead to violence because when Mista Muskwa failed to scare his pursuers, he turned and fled, as all bullies do when confronted with determination and resolve.

It is said that Mista Muskwa and his pursuers were so fast that they flew into the northern night sky. Just as this happened, the bear was mortally wounded and he turned and faced his attackers. Mista Muskwa was bleeding badly and he shook, as a wet dog would shake, and as he did, blood from his wound fell to the earth and landed and stayed on all the broad leafed plants. That is why the leaves of all broad-leafed plants change color in the fall. As Mista Muskwa, shook he also splattered a drop of blood on the bird that mortally wounded him. To this day, *pipichew* – the robin – has a red chest.

To remind all of the rewards of bullies, Mista Muskwa (Figure 2) was placed in the sky along with the seven birds (Corona Borealis). Pipichew (the brightest of the 7 birds) was given a further honour by being granted a special egg. It was the color of the sky and had speckles that represented the stars.

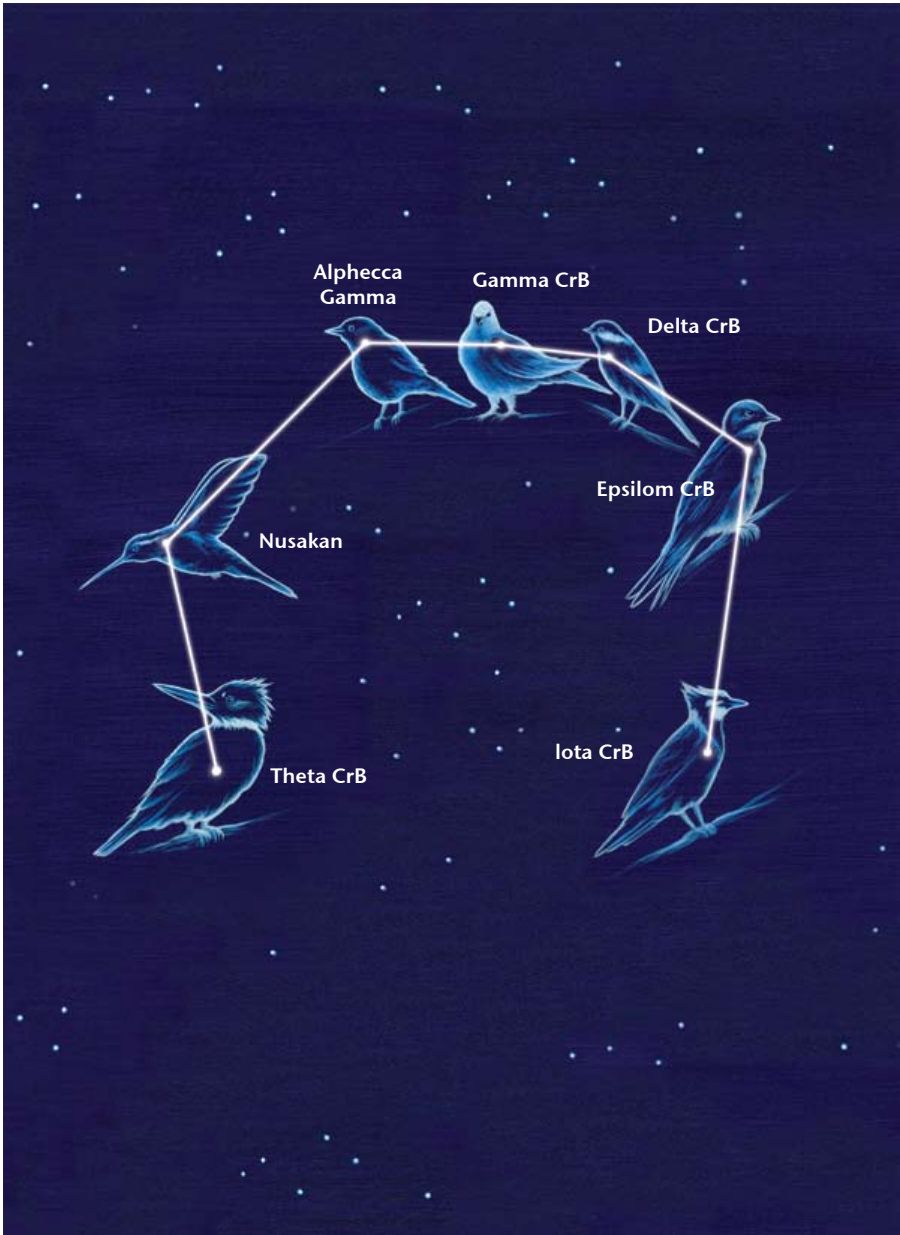


Figure 3: *Tehpakoop Pinesisuk (The Seven Birds)* is associated with the *Mista Muskwa* story and reminds us why the Robin has a red chest.

MATOOTISAN: THE SWEAT LODGE

Once there was a young man named *Tikoom* – the louse – who had seven uncles and they lived at a time of scarcity and sickness. It came to be that food was needed for the community and the young man's seven uncles decided to go and find fresh meat. They were to return to the community in three days time. The young man waited impatiently, for he wanted to go with them, but they decided against this. After three days, *Tikoom's* seven uncles had yet to return. The young man waited all the next day and still no one returned, after which he decided that he should go look for them. He left that afternoon.

Tikoom travelled all afternoon and into the late evening following their tracks. Eventually he came to the place where they had made camp. Here he found an empty shelter that contained nothing but seven rocks. The shelter offered protection from the cold wind and it was getting very cold and dark. He decided to spend the night there and continue on in the morning. That night, as he slept, he had a dream. In the dream, his uncles came to him and told him what had happened to them. The young man was told that his uncles happened upon a *mistapew* (Giant). This *mistapew* traded in spirits and could capture spirits and transfer them from one spirit being to another. This amused the giant greatly because it caused mass confusion and fear and this is what this *mistapew* lived on. Thus, when the giant saw the seven brothers, he felt that this was an opportunity to capture their spirits. The giant invited the weary hunters into his camp to spend the night and rest. In the morning he would tell them where to find fresh game. As the brothers slept the giant crept into their dreams and took their spirits. He did this because he wanted to eat their bodies but could not do so if they were still in possession of their spirits.

The giant transferred the spirits of the seven brothers into seven rocks because he knew that the rock could hold spirits; these rocks were individually regarded as either *Nimoshoom Assini* – the grandfather rock, and *Nookoom Assini* – the grandmother rock. These *assini* – rocks – hold the spirits of the night when it is cold under the moon and the spirits of the light when it is warm under the heat of the sun. Only when the *assini* are heated until they are bright red are the grandfather and grandmother spirits released. This was how the giant got the spirits of the uncles.

The young man was told by his uncles how to release their spirits. They

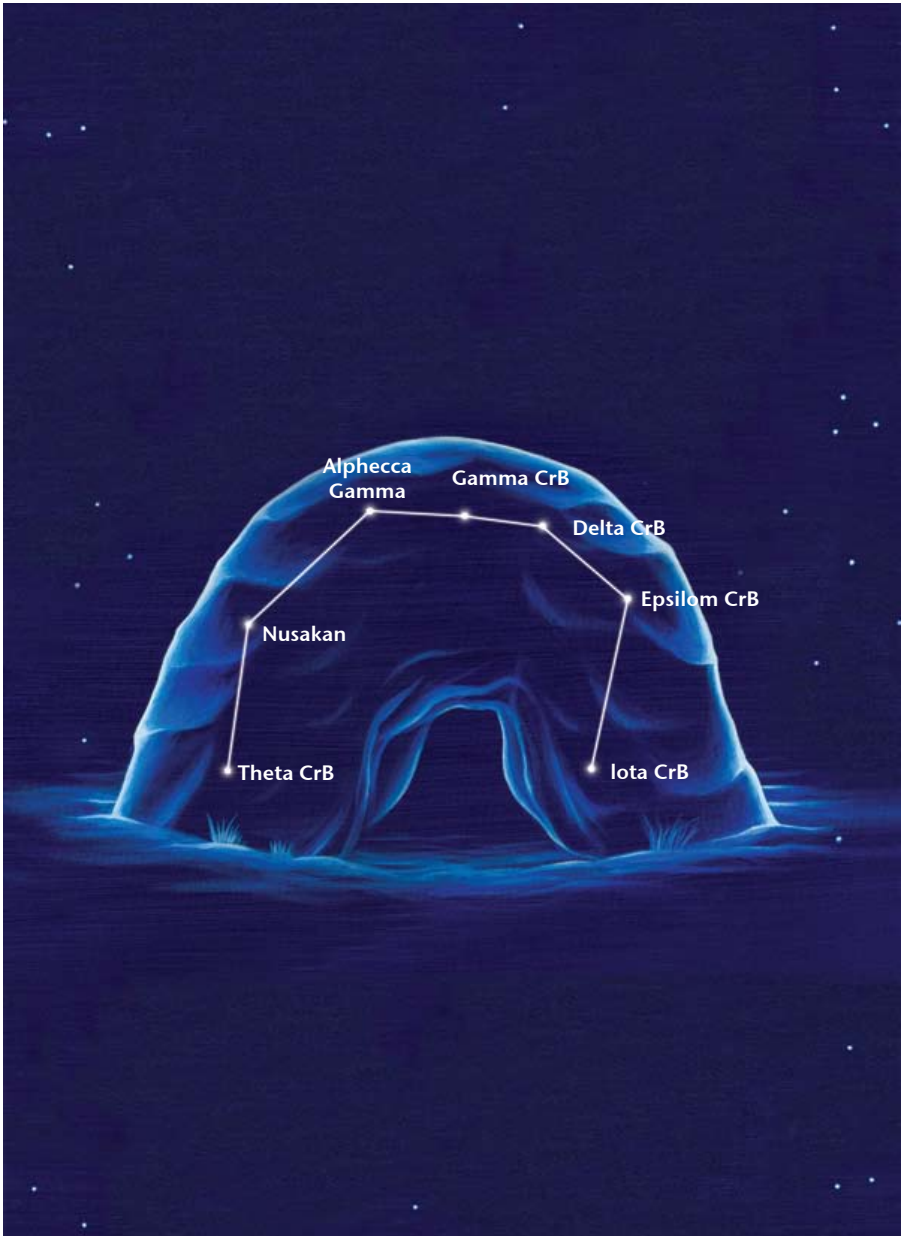


Figure 4: Matootisan (The Sweat Lodge) tells the story of how the sweat lodge ceremony came into being.

could not return to him in human form but would visit him if he performed a ceremony they would show him. As instructed, he built a domed lodge using branches from a willow tree as the ribs and hides of deer, moose or buffalo to cover the branches. He placed the seven rocks he had seen in the abandoned camp into the base of the fire he was instructed to build outside of the dome. When this was done, he lit the fire and let it burn until the rocks became red-hot. He brought the red-hot rocks into the domed structure. Once inside the domed structure with the red-hot rocks in the centre, he was to close the door so the dome was completely dark and begin to sing and pray as he was instructed. As he sang and prayed, he splashed water on the hot rocks which released their spirits. He saw the spirits of his uncles first as lights – the uncles were born again from the domed lodge. The willow ribs of the domed lodge symbolize the womb of our mother and it was she who has the power to release and bring forth new life.

This is what Tikoom did and released his uncles to the spirit world. For his determination, faith, and trust, the Creator gave to him a ceremony with which to heal and, by doing so, feed his people. He was also given a new name: *Assini Awasis* - Stone Child. He would forever be remembered as the boy who bought the sweat lodge to the people.

Today we see the sweat lodge in the night sky and at certain times of the night we can see the Sweat Lodge (Corona Borealis), the Altar (Polaris) and the Sweat Lodge Fire and rocks (Pleiades) all in the sky at once and be reminded of where to go for comfort, hope, spiritual sustenance, direction, and healing. These are stories that come from the knowledge based on the Ininew people. It is our responsibility to pass these stories on to our children. As children, the stories of Orion the Hunter and The Great Bear were presented to our impressionable young minds as knowledge given from great cultures; no other alternative viewpoints were presented. Such experiences left me with the impression that my people were not smart enough to have such perspectives as those that can be associated with the heavens. Mainstream education has, and still often does suggest that European thought and perspective represent the pinnacle of knowledge and others must accept and employ such thoughts and perspectives in order to be regarded as intelligent.

I now know this is not the case. Ininew history, philosophy, science, and governance represent legitimate aspects of a rich culture. It is the opinion of many in Ininew communities that children become familiar with aspects of their ancestral traditions, heritage, and consciousness.

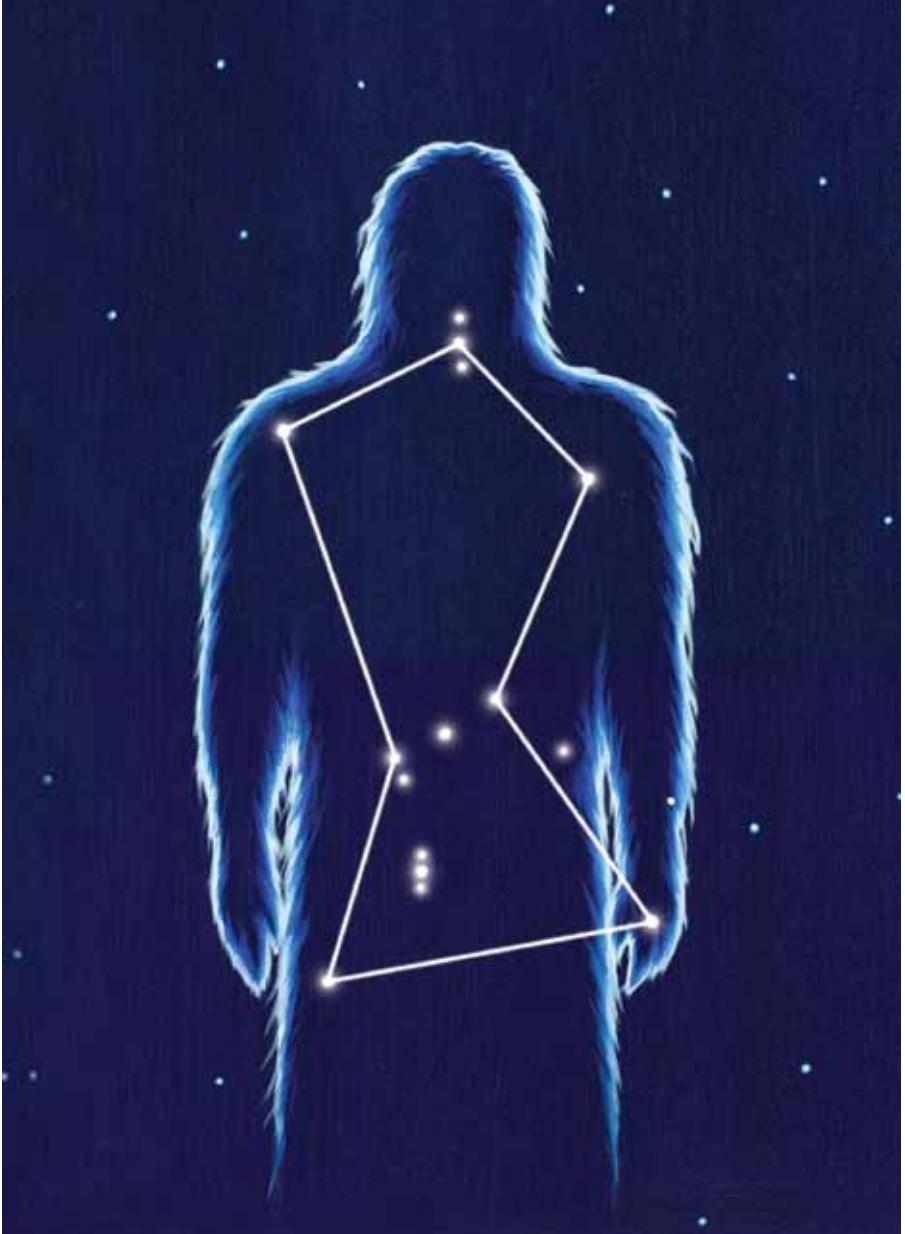


Figure 5: Mistapew (A Giant) stole the souls of the seven uncles in the story of Matootisan.

CONCLUSION

I hope to see a day where Anishinabe, Dene, Oji-Cree, Inuit, Lakota , Ininewuk and all other marginalized peoples hold their stories and relationships to the stars in plain view for their children and all the world to see. First Nations astronomy can be just as relevant as that associated with Roman or Greek mythology and makes people aware of the quality and quantity of knowledge that has been overlooked in Canada. We arrive at knowledge from many different paths and the more aware we are of other possibilities, the more sensitive we will be to understanding and difference.

Science Specialists of the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre continue to provide opportunities for educators in First Nations schools to encourage their students to learn about, among other things, Ininew perspectives of astronomy and astronomy. Our centre facilitates this with the utilization of an inflatable portable planetarium which we take to all the schools we work with. The planetarium inflates to approximately 5 metres in height and 6 metres in diameter and can accommodate 25 students and staff comfortably. In the span of three years we have managed to gather approximately 14 stories and have identified the same amount of constellations but, we are told by various Elders and Knowledge Keepers, there are untold numbers of stories about the stars and skies and slowly they will reveal themselves.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I pay homage to the Elders that revived the *muskiki ishkatow* (medicine fire) that was slowly dying in the hearts of our young people. I honour Grandpa Joe Doucette, Ernest Tootoosis, Alex Bonaise, Wilfred Peltier, Phillip Deer, Art Soloman, Albert Lightening, Emma and Antoine Sand, Murdo Scribe, and so many others who have gone on, but left with us the direction and vision needed to continue. The aforementioned Elders may not have given the actual stories that are documented herein but were instrumental in the revival of the desire to see these perspectives put forward to a wider audience.

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