

**Star Stories from America’s Indian Nations**

**INTRODUCTION**

Most Americans learn to identify groupings of stars and planets in the night sky with names and mythologies that were imported to this land from the ancient Greek, Egyptian, and Babylonian cultural traditions of the Eastern Hemisphere. Mythological characters like Orion the Hunter, Venus the Goddess, Draco the Dragon, and Ursa Major the Bear are linked with stories that originated half a world away. Many people in North America are unaware of the rich celestial folklore traditions that are rooted in this continent. The indigenous nations of North America, often collectively referred to as “Native Americans” or preferably “American Indians,” have their own richly illustrated constellations and engaging stories to tell about the night sky.

The following stories were selected from various sources for use in a class offered by the education program of the **Fairbanks Museum & Planetarium** in St. Johnsbury, VT. Under the star-lit dome of the planetarium, a Museum educator would bring these stories to life while viewing the constellations that inspired them. The planetarium is a unique and valuable resource, but these stories can be told without a star simulator, especially when the real stars are just outside! A star chart is a helpful tool for identifying constellations throughout the year.

These stories deliver only a sampling of American Indian mythology linked with the stars. Each constellation is identified by its American Indian name followed by the English translation and the more familiar name for the constellation. The name of the American Indian tribe associated with each constellation myth is also included. Additional astronomical resources are listed at the end of this guide to help teachers further acquaint themselves with the stars.

## CONSTELLATIONS



### K-tsee Awa-soos

#### The Great Bear in the Stars (Ursa Major, Big Dipper) Abenaki Nation

Also known as **Kitci Muwiniyul**, this constellation is visible every night of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. The ancient Greeks weren't the only culture to imagine a bear circling the northern skies! The four brightest stars (the 'scoop' of the dipper) are part of the bear, but the three stars in the 'handle' are not an abnormally long tail, as in some stories. These three bright stars are the **Three Hunters** that forever chase the bear through the skies. Keen eyes will reveal that the **second hunter's** star, commonly known by its Arabic name **Mizar**, is very closely followed by a much dimmer star known by the Arabic name **Alcor**. In one version of this tale, that fainter star is a dog named **Bright Teeth**. Another version of this story says that the dimmer companion is the hungry hunter's cooking pot!

During summer nights, K-tsee Awa-soos is seen running from west to east low across the northern horizon. By autumn, the bear is seen rearing up on its hind-legs in the northeastern sky, and this is when the hunters wound their prey. The injured bear's blood rains down from the sky and turns many trees' leaves bright red in the forest. During the long winter nights, the bear is seen upside down high over-head in the northern sky. During spring nights, the bear is seen returning to the earth, descending in the northwest and the annual chase begins anew.

Resources:

*Seven Eyes, Seven Legs: Supernatural Stories of the Abenaki*  
Gerard Rancourt Tsonakwa and Yolakia Wapitaska (Kiva, 2001)



### Misingwe ta Gitaskogak

#### The Masked Hunter and the Great Serpent (Mars and Scorpio) Abenaki Nation

Reprinted from a Special Section of the *Arizona Daily Star* entitled "Return to Mars," April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2001:

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*Local astronomer and storyteller Gerard Tsonakwa, a member of the Abenaki tribe of Southern Québec, recounts his tribe's story of Misengwe: "Mars is Misengwe, the Red and Black Mask Being. Red on one side and black on the other, Misengwe sorts out good and evil. This time of year, he hunts Gitaskogak, the Great Serpent, in the southern sky. What my people see as the great serpent, many people call the constellation Scorpius. Misengwe's red side is turned to us this time of year so we can see him, but at other times, he presents his black side and is invisible in the night sky."*

To find the Great Serpent **Gitaskogak** (or **Scorpio**) in the sky, just wait until **spring**, **summer**, and **September** and look low in the **South**. **Misengwe** (or Mars), being a planetary wanderer, can potentially be seen anywhere among the stars along the Ecliptic, or Zodiac line including right in the Great Serpent itself! Don't confuse Misengwe for the bright red star that is Gitaskogak's heart. (The ancient Greeks dubbed this star **Antares**, which means "Not Mars!") **Gitaskogak** (a.k.a. Gitaskog or Peetaskog) has often been seen in the big lake that Abenakis call **Bitawbagok**: Lake Champlain, which cuts between northwest Vermont and New York State. This serpent, when not in his starry abode, is often called "Champ."

Resources:

*Arizona Daily Star's "Return to Mars"*

<http://www.azstarnet.com/mars2001/fact.html>



**Msatawa**

***The Evening Star (Venus, "Morning Star")***

**Abenaki Nation**

This bright light in the sky was the result of an archery contest between the great hero **Gluskabi** and his little, furry, flute-playing, shape-shifting companion named **Megoomweesos** (a.k.a. Me-koom-wee-so). According to legend, Megoomweesos's arrow created the "Lakes in the Clouds" on **Kodawadjo**, which is now called Mt. Washington, NH. Gluskabi's shot sailed over all the land, and his arrow punched a tiny hole among the stars that still allows light from the other side of the sky to leak through.

**Msatawa** (or Venus) is always near to the Sun as seen from Earth: its orbit is closer to the Sun than ours. When it is to the East of the Sun, Msatawa lingers in the Western skies right after dusk. This is the "Evening Star." When on the Sun's Western side, Msatawa will rise first at dawn in the East as the "Morning Star." Often, Msatawa's orbit will take it in front of or behind the Sun, and during these times the planet is invisible to our eyes.

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### **Oot-Kwah-Tah**

#### ***The Seven Starry Dancers (Pleiades, The Seven Sisters)***

#### **Onondaga Nation, Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy**

**Oot-Kwah-Tah** can be seen from fall to spring high up in the Southern skies. These dancers (or the Seven Sisters) are just to the West of Taurus the Bull and Orion the Hunter. This tiny yet distinctive constellation is the celestial home of seven disobedient Onondaga children who did not heed their parents' warnings about the powers of sacred music.

Resources:

*Keepers of the Night: Native American Stories and Nocturnal Activities for Children*  
Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac (Fulcrum, 1994)



### **Gi li' ut sun stan un' yi** (gil-LEE-oot-soon stan-UNH-ye)

#### ***The Place where the Dog Ran ( The Milky Way)***

#### **Tsalagi (Cherokee) Nation**

This story explains how the dazzling path of the "Milky Way" was made by a big dog that tried to steal precious cornmeal from a village. Most of what he stole was spilled across the sky as this bad dog made his frantic getaway from the pursuing villagers. **The Place where the Dog Ran** (or the Milky Way) is somewhat visible all year-round, but it is at its brightest during short summer nights.

Resources:

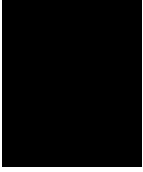
*The Story of the Milky Way: A Cherokee Tale*  
Joseph Bruchac and Gayle Ross (Dial, 1995)

#### *Spotted Wolf's Corner*

Spotted Wolf is an elderly Apache man who has very thoughtfully collected hundreds of stories from at least 94 nations. Two versions of this Cherokee story are available on his site:

<http://www.snowowl.com/swolflegendscontent.html>

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