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Editorial: The Talking Sky

Bernadette Brady

The chapters in this volume are selected from papers presented at the conference, The Talking Sky, held on 1 – 2 July 2017 in Bath, UK, by the Sophia Centre for the Study of Culture in Cosmology at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. The conference theme was humanity's spiritual connection to the sky as expressed in story. All cultures tell stories and derive meaning from the sky. Often the word myth is used to describe such stories, but the definition of myth varies from an account of the world which is false to one which may not have taken place as exactly told but which contains a core of truth about the human condition. It is this latter definition that the conference adopted.

The cultural use and meaning of sky stories can, however, be obscure to the modern scholar who may have a limited understanding of the celestial movements. Indeed, there is little need today for an individual to have sky awareness. The calendar and time have both long been separated from a community's observations of the sky for the mysteries of eclipses, lunar phases and the rhythm of the seasons no longer require mythic explanation.

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Thus, to a large extent, western society has lost its sky stories or has replaced them with modern versions such as deep space photography or tales of space science fiction. Hence today a nursery rhyme like 'Hey diddle diddle' with a cow jumping over the moon is seen only as a nursery rhyme emerging out of an eighteenth-century book of children's stories. Any suggestions that this nursery rhyme might have its roots in a piece of folklore linked to the sky would be, at best, deemed as speculative, or not even considered a sky story as it is an unrecognisable story fragment with no place in today's dominant sky view. A view which is that of the celestial sphere, the globe of stars with its constellations, or an orrery-like view of the solar system with the planets all in a line and the sun in the centre.

Informed by such a view, it is easy to assume that a past culture's sky stories are only mnemonics, narratives used to learn about the stars in the sky, or children's stories that explain thunder or the phases of the moon. Such perceptions are, however, far removed from the complex visual palette encountered with naked-eye astronomy. This palette contains the annual movement of star clusters or dark shapes, the roaming planets, the lunar phase in some type of magical dance with the sun, the highs and lows of the sun and moon, and their relationship to both place and stars, and the times of dark and light, cold and hot, these are just some of the components of possible sky stories. Additionally, the originators of any sky story would have a framework of diverse cultural or at times, theological agendas that were linked to the sky. A story could, therefore, be a way of transmitting seasonal information, thus helping to establish a society's calendar, or a story could provide a religious framework focused on the divine and a culture's origins. Stories can explain the sky or the sky can be used to create stories to explain life on earth. Hence an essential component when working with ancient stories is not to look for our modern sky: we will not find our sky in their stories.

As already stated, sky stories are a part of every culture. These stories, however, are fragile for if they lose their link to the sky, then the understanding of their original meaning can be lost. In such cases the story may continue to live in oral tradition but become increasingly obscure or even absurd to the new listener's ear. In the pre-Islamic sky poem by Abū al-Qāssim Muḥammad ibn Hānī' (932-973 CE), there is a story of the murder of a father and the grief of his three daughters who seek to find a place to bury him and then take revenge against his murderer.[1] Their lone

[1] ibn Hānī al-Andalusī, *The Dīwān of Ibn Hānī the Andalusian* (Beirut: Dār Beirūt lil-Ṭibā'ah wal-Nashr, 1980). My thanks to Mai Lootah for the English translation of this poem.

brother cannot help, as he is weak with a fluttering life force. Such a story has all the threads of a great mythic tragedy, yet it is firmly embedded in the sky by its name, *Qasīdat al-Nujūm* 'The poem or ode to the stars', where it was used as a way of describing the stars and how they move in the tail of Ursa Major, the great bear. In the story the pole star is the murderer and the three daughters are the three stars in the tail of the bear that circle around it. They are followed by a fourth weak star that is hard to see, the weak brother. If this star story ever becomes separated from its sky poem it is unlikely that it could be restored to its correct place within the heavens. Instead, this story of family tragedy would be left to drift through history as a piece of folklore without a recognisable purpose.

Easier to restore would be the story of the same constellation Ursa Major from the Mesquakie people of North America. In their story, instead of a murder and family grief, they speak of three hunters chasing a bear.[2] The tiny faint fourth star is assigned to a small puppy which belongs to one of the hunters. This story contains strong seasonal themes. The evenings that reveal the bear in the sky standing on its hind legs is the autumn and this is when the hunters strike. It is said that it is the bear's blood that turns the leaves of the trees red. [3] This motif of the bear standing upright on its hind legs at the time the leaves turn red is just one of the ways the story is pinned to the heavens. Indeed such a clear narrative binding the constellation to the seasons ensures that the story will never lose its connection to the sky.

Another story concerning the celestial pole comes from the period of the Old Kingdom in Egypt. In the Pyramid Texts, which are the religious and mythical texts written on the walls of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasty Pyramids around the years of 2400 BCE, there is another type of narrative about the stars.[4] These religious writings tell of the journey of the pharaoh's soul. Upon his death he rises into the heavens on a ladder or on the wings of a great vulture. In this way, according to these ancient texts, he becomes a star. The texts describe a particular star that the pharaoh used. First, it is seen to rise over the horizon. Later, instead of setting, it is seen, night after night, to ride high in the sky and join the circumpolar stars, the divine stars that rotate around the celestial north pole and never touch or dip below the horizon.[5] It is easy to see this story as a religious myth with no basis in the

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[2] William Jones, *Fox Texts* (Leyden, 1907), pp. 70–75

[3] William Jones, *Fox Texts* (Leyden, 1907), pp. 70–75.

[4] R. O. Faulkner, 'The King and the Star-Religion in the Pyramid Texts', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 25 (1966): p. 153.

[5] Bernadette Brady, 'A Consideration of Egyptian Ascension Mythology as a Reflection of the Mythopoeic Nature of Star Phases and Its Implication for Belief

sky and naked-eye astronomy, but this would be an error. Some stars do move in this way, as the texts describe. In the first century CE Claudius Ptolemy defined such as star as belonging to the group that underwent what he labelled as a time of 'curtailed passage', a time of acting like a circumpolar star: for periods the stars rotate around the celestial north pole and do not set, but for other periods they rise and set every night.[6] The point here is that this sky story, which remains complete and intact on the walls of the pyramids, is largely unrecognisable to the modern eye. This story never lost its link to the heavens but it lost its people.

Therefore, some sky stories, like that of the grieving daughters, need to be held in the secure grip of their poem, clearly labelled as a sky story in order to maintain their cultural link to the heavens. Another type of story, such as the Mesquakie hunters killing the bear with its blood colouring the leaves red in autumn, will have the sky sewn into the fabric of its narrative. Still other stories, like the pharaonic ascent of the soul to the stars, which have the sky deeply embedded in their narrative, can be overlooked by modern scholars, as the way the sky moves has slipped from people's general knowledge.

Nevertheless, all sky stories serve a cultural purpose. The pre-Islamic sky poem of ibn Hānī' is a moral tale reminding all of the consequences of murder. For the Mesquakie, their story was about linking the image of a constellation, the sky bear, to a particular time of the year. Their story offered an explanation for the colours of autumn, and the turning of the year. For the Egyptians of the Old Kingdom their story emerged out of their stellar theology, with their religious beliefs entangled in and partly defined by the movement of the stars. All these stories served the culture that carried them and this cultural element gave them life, empowering them to be handed down from one generation to another.

When the links between sky and story are lost, the researcher can be left with only speculation as their tool. However, there are sky-story markers which can be used. In discussing folklore, Alan Garner pointed out that the times of greatest confusion or absurdities within a story are the times when there is a hidden necessity at work.[7] He speaks of the story or characters

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in the Descent of Divine Beings', in *Current Research in Egyptology Volume Xii,* ed. by Heba Abd El-Gawad, et al. (Oxford: Oxbow, 2012), pp. 40–47.

[6] Claudius Ptolemy, *The Phases of the Fixed Stars* (Berkeley Springs, WV: The Golden Hind Press, 1993), p. 5.

[7] Alan Garner, 'Oral History and Applied Archeaology in East Cheshire', in *The Voice That Thunders : Essay and Lectures* (London: Harvill, 1997), pp. 65–79 (p. 71).

being forced to fit the material facts which, for him, were to do with landscape and locations. Garner's arguments can be extended to the necessity produced by the sky, the inevitability of its regular clock-work motion. A character needing to portray a celestial movement will be seen to act absurdly. Hence a story can hold an exacting string of details which sweep the characters up into a proscriptive inevitable cyclic pattern, produced by the sky's regularity. The Mesquakie and their repetitive, seasonal story of hunting a bear has this cyclic inevitable signature. When the story's link to the sky is understood these cyclic turns in the narrative are expected. It is, however, when the link between sky and story is lost that it is the story's absurd twists and turns that can herald a link to the sky. Therefore, exploring a narrative for its potential to be a sky story begins with a search for such absurdities. Fortunately, these sky-themed absurdities are not hard to identify in a narrative.

For instance, if a story discusses characters that are fixed in relation to each other or fixed to a place, it implies the story may be referring to constellations or stars and a particular place on the horizon. Alternatively, when the story discusses characters going around in a circle such as the grieving daughters of the Islamic sky poem then the characters in these stories are acting like circumpolar stars. Stories of comings and goings, meetings and partings can be about the planets as they move among the stars. One such example is from the letters of the sixth century BCE Assyrian priests to their kings.[8] These letters wrote of the movements of the planets, personified as gods, and created the never-ending sky story of astrology. Stories of characters which take a fixed unswerving path regardless of the path's outcome, could be a story of a comet. Stories of death, the underworld and eventual rebirth may be motifs describing the phases of the stars or planets – the times when these heavenly bodies disappear from view for the night or for a period of time, only to reappear again later in the year. Importantly however, such markers in a story are hints, not proofs, of the presence of the sky in the origin of the story. But such hints can point to the nature of the actual naked-eye astronomy described. Consequently, understanding the basic naked-eye astronomy is invaluable when considering a myth as a potential sky story.

More problematic, however, is understanding the cultural relevance of the story. The far more difficult question is, why did the original people of the story want to embed certain information about the sky in a story? This cultural context, when found, becomes the glue that can bind the story into

[8] See Hermann Hunger, *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1992).

a meaningful narrative. Without this glue, speculations will always hold any possible identifiable sky story together. Thus the journey into sky myths is at its heart a journey into a culture's view of the sky, and it requires a combination of naked-eye astronomy and anthropology. The following chapters approach this undertaking in different ways.

Frances Clynes's chapter titled 'The Role of Solar Deities in Irish Megalithic Monuments' takes the well-established solar mythology of cycles of Irish mythology and the repeated mentioning of Brú na Bóinne, the home of the Sun gods, Dagda and Lugh. Clynes shows that this sacred place was the great monument of Newgrange, the place where myth, archaeology and the sky come together to be embedded in place. Here the mythology is the glue that binds the land and sky together. Another approach is shown in the chapter by Signe Cohen titled 'What Do the Gods Call the Sky? Naming the Celestial in Old Norse'. In the twelfth-century Old Norse text, the *Alvíssmál,* Cohen pointed out that the text is characterised by an extraordinary number of rare and obscure words. Using this text, Cohen showed that in the astronomy of the Old Norse culture they did not take a fixed view of celestial features but shifted their non-human descriptions and terms for celestial elements depending on the cultural and environmental needs of the individual, elf or dwarf, god or giant. Cohen's chapter reminds the researcher that a celestial event can have many names or descriptions within a single tradition.

The next two chapters consider two bright stars in the northern sky but through different cultural lenses. The stars are Altair in the Eagle and Vega in the Lyra, also known as the swooping vulture. Darrelyn Gunzburg explores the Greek mythology of the Stymphalin Birds in her chapter titled 'The Summer Triangle and the Stymphalian Birds'. She argued that these great stellar birds, which includes Deneb Adige, the tail of the Swan, hold a palimpsest of myths, which are overlayed by history and altered by the shifting role of the goddess Artemis over time. Gunzburg, therefore, argued as Cohen did in the previous chapter, for the cultural sensitivity of sky myths. In contrast to Gunzburg's chapter is that of Morag Feeney-Beaton titled, 'Altair and Vega, *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl,* an analysis of a living sky-myth'. She has explored an ancient Chinese sky myth based on Altair and Vega, their cyclic phase movement producing a narrative of lovers: a divine woman who weaves the heavens, and a mortal cowherder. Rather than this myth suffering the fate of the Stymphalian Birds and turning into the Summer Triangle, Feeney Beaton cites the current Qixi Festival in China and the Tanabata Star Festival in Japan which are both focused on the myth of weaving the heavens. Both festivals, in different

ways, are when gifts are offered to the sky to gain greater weaving skills. In this way Feeney Beaton shows that the star narrative of two lovers is a living star story, wrapped in the craft of weaving and still relevant in today's modern world.

Kirsten Hoving, in her chapter titled 'Joseph Cornell's Cosmos: An Artist's Modern Interpretations of Astronomical Myths' takes another approach to sky narratives and shows how they can be personalised and made to serve the individual’s exploration of self. Her chapter focuses on the USA artist Joseph Cornell (1903-1972) and one example she cited is his approach to the story of Marilyn Monroe, which he links to the mythology of Coma Berenice. This is sky myth as personal, meaningful, and expressive of facets of the self. Hoving makes the case that the sky 'talked' to Joseph Cornell, revealing the power of sky narratives in today's contemporary society.

This contemporary theme is carried forward by Astrid Leimlehner's chapter titled 'Old myths in a new story: Antoine de Saint-Éxupéry's *The Little Prince'.* She explored this 1943 children's story and argued that it is a retelling of Plato's stellar creation myth of the *Timaeus, t*he stellar theology of the soul belonging to the stars, and its celestial journey of descent to earth and then return to the heavens. Leimlehner makes the case that such stellar narratives are a deep pattern of the human mind and, as in the previous chapter on Joseph Cornell, Antoine de Saint-Éxupéry personalised the story into his own search for self. The final chapter in this volume also stays in the contemporary period and is by Ben Pestell titled 'The Sun Within: New Solar Myth in Early Novels of Wilson Harris and J.G. Ballard'. Pestell argued that Harris in 1960 and Ballard in 1962 both used in their novels internal images of the Sun to construct modern mythical landscapes which could be utilised for an atavistic pilgrimage. Harris used his landscape for an exploration of the self, while Ballard privileged spiritual unity.

Thus the volume ends having come full circle, like the turning of the sky. The first chapter by Clynes considered the annual cycle of the sun across the sky. She argued that this cycle was a cultural centrepiece to the Celtic mythology cycle which was embedded in the location of the Boyne Valley; myth and sky planted in place. The last chapter by Pestell is located in the 1960s and is focused on the mythic power of the sun embedded into the self. Hence what is revealed throughout the volume is the human recognition of the eternity of the sky, a recognition that moves across all cultures and time periods. Duane Hamaker argued that perceptions of the heavens will shift from one culture to another and by seeking to see the sky

through another people's eyes is to step closer to understanding their worldview.[9] Thus, by standing in the Boyne Valley, by understanding the Old Norse words for sky, by considering the shifting myths around the Summer Triangle, and the Chinese story of lovers and the weaving of the heavens, by rethinking the *Little Prince*, and then visiting the contemporary works of first Joseph Cornell and later Harris and Ballard, a tapestry of humanity's relationship to the heavens is revealed. No one chapter gives the complete picture but combined they point to the profound deep relationship humanity has with the sky.

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[9] Duane W. Hamacher, 'On the Astronomical Knowledge and Traditions of Aboriginal Australians' (PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 2011), p. 13.