

Navajo: Whirling Man and Whirling Woman

A long time ago, when cities were small and the night skies were dark, people told stories about the stars. They imagined animals and objects and people and places, high overhead. Everyone had different stories to tell.

The Navajo people lived in the desert. They told stories about animals and objects and people and places. And they told a story about the Whirling Man and the Whirling Woman, who danced in the sky.

The man and the woman lived in the northern sky, high above the desert. Where some people see the Big Dipper, the Navajo saw the Whirling Man. And where some people see the ancient queen Cassiopeia, the Navajo saw the Whirling Woman.

In between the man and the woman lies a very special star. The Navajo called this star the Home Fire.

If you go out on a clear night, you can watch the Whirling Man and the Whirling Woman, and if you watch for a while—if you're very patient—you can see them move. As the man moves down in the sky, the woman moves up! When the man is low in the sky, the woman is high above. And then, they change places. As the woman moves down in the sky, the man moves up.

The Whirling Man and the Whirling Woman really do dance in the sky.

And if you watch very carefully, you'll see that one star hardly moves at all. At the center of all this whirling lies the Home Fire. The man and woman dance in a slow circle around the Home Fire.

A long time ago, Navajo homes were shaped like circles, too. A man and a woman might live in a circular house, and where would they build their fire, to cook their food

and to keep themselves warm? Why, in the center of the house, in the center of the circle—just as the Home Fire lies at the center of the whirling dance in the sky.

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Chinese: Tchi-Niu and Kien-Niou

In China, a long time ago, people told a story about two people, Tchi-Niu and Kien-Niou, who lived in the sky, near the hazy river of light we call the “Milky Way.”

Tchi-Niu was the daughter of the Sun Emperor, who ruled the sky during the day. She was a talented weaver, who wove colors together to make beautiful pictures in the sky. Every morning and every night, the Princess would weave the colors of sunrise and sunset, and people always admired her work.

But she was very lonely.

One day, gazing out on the river of the Milky Way, the Princess spied one of her father’s herdsman, guiding cattle along the water’s edge. She fell immediately in love.

The herdsman was Kien-Niou, who served her father well, keeping his cattle in their proper place. The Sun Emperor was quite pleased with his daughter’s choice: he approved of the young herdsman who did his job so well.

One very happy day, Tchi-Niu and Kien-Niou were married. And from that day forward, they spent all their time together, and neither one was lonely. They would walk all day, or talk all night! They would picnic by the riverside, or wander among the stars.

They spent so much time together that Kien-Niou began to neglect his cattle. Cows would wander everywhere and sometimes got lost. A cow might show up in someone's backyard! Or their kitchen! Or their bedroom! And Tchi-Niu, too, forgot all about her weaving. No colors showed up in sunrises and sunsets, so every morning and every night were just grey, grey, grey.

The Sun Emperor became very angry. He told Tchi-Niu to weave her colors, and he told Kien-Niou to watch his cattle, and they tried to obey,... But they would always forget. A cow might show up where no cow should ever be, or night would fall all grey and dull, and the Sun Emperor would get angry all over again.

Finally, he lost his temper completely, and he banished Kien-Niou, to tend cattle on the far side of the river, far away from Tchi-Niu. The husband and wife were never able to see each other, and they became very sad.

Every morning and every night, the Princess would diligently weave the sunrise and the sunset, but the colors didn't seem quite right. People admired the sunrises and the sunsets, but not as much before. The Sun Emperor saw how sad his daughter was, and he felt sorry for her, but he couldn't decide what to do.

As he was thinking about this problem one day, he happened to see a group of birds—magpies, to be exact—working very hard to find food. He noticed how the magpies would work together and cooperate. And then the Emperor had an idea.

On the seventh day of the seventh month, the Sun Emperor called on all the magpies in China. He told them to form a bridge across the river of the Milky Way. And the Emperor promised Tchi-Niu and Kien-Niou that once a year, he would allow the magpies to bridge the river between them, so they could spend one night a year together.

And so it is that once a year, on the seventh day of the seventh month, all the magpies in China come together to build a bridge across the Milky Way.

On that one night, on that one special night of the year, Tchi-Niu and Kien-Niou can meet in the middle of the bridge. On that one night, the magpies cry tears of joy for the reunited couple. The magpies' tears fall as rain on earth, or so the story goes.

When we look up at the sky today, we don't see any magpies, and we don't see a bridge, but we can find Tchi-Niu and Kien-Niou, and we can follow the winding river of the Milky Way.

Tchi-Niu shines brightly as the star we call "Vega." And Kien-Niou lies across the Milky Way, the star we call "Altair."

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African: Mr. Sun and Mrs. Moon

In Africa, a long time ago, people told a story about the sun and the moon. But not the same sun and moon we see in our sky today. No, the story goes that a long time ago things were very different.

Mr. Sun and Mrs. Moon were happily married. And back then, Mrs. Moon shone just as brightly as her husband. The two of them would rise together in the east every morning, and they would set together in the west every night. During the daytime, it was very bright—imagine having two suns in the sky! But at night, it grew terribly dark.

People were afraid of the long, dark night. They were afraid to leave their houses, afraid they would get lost.

So the people begged Mr. Sun and Mrs. Moon to give them some light at nighttime, too, so they wouldn't feel scared in the dark. Mr. Sun and Mrs. Moon felt sorry for the people, and they agreed that he would shine during the day, and that she would shine all night.

And so it was, for a while, that the sun would rise in the east every morning, and as soon as he set in the west at night, the moon would make her appearance in the east, staying up all night and setting in the west, just as soon as her husband would rise again in the east, and...

Well, this was no good at all! The bright, bright sun was up all day, and the bright, bright moon was up all night. The sky never got dark, and the earth couldn't cool off. With the light and heat of the sun shining all day, and the moon shining just as bright during the night, it grew hotter and hotter and hotter. Plants started to die, and people grew worried.

So the people begged Mr. Sun and Mrs. Moon to change their ways once more. Mr. Sun agreed. "Join me in the daytime," he told Mrs. Moon. "We can shine together again."

"I don't like that idea very much," said Mrs. Moon. "People ignore me when I shine with you. I get much more attention when I shine by myself!"

"Well, then, at least don't shine so brightly. The earth grows too hot with my warmth during the day, and yours at night. Dim your light, so that people won't suffer."

"Dim your own light, husband! I can shine just as brightly as you."

Now Mr. Sun was quite annoyed. His wife would not listen to him, and yet he saw no reason to dim his light or change his ways. So he came up with a plan.

“I’ll tell you what,” said Mr. Sun. “We’ll have a race! We’ll run from here across the river, and whoever wins the race will agree to grow dimmer, so that people can have a break from the light and heat.”

Mrs. Moon agreed. And she didn’t even wait for her husband—she immediately set off toward the river in the sky.

Mr. Sun set off after her, but just as soon as Mrs. Moon reached the river, Mr. Sun stopped dead in his tracks.

Mrs. Moon plunged into the river, and—whoosh! And hissssss! The river began to steam from Mrs. Moon’s heat. And Mrs. Moon began to cool off, getting dimmer and dimmer and dimmer and...

She jumped out of the river! But it was too late. Now, Mrs. Moon’s light was not nearly as bright as her husband’s.

“Oooh! You tricked me,” she said, but her husband laughed and laughed and laughed.

And so Mrs. Moon continued to shine at night, but not nearly so brightly as before. The earth warmed up during the day and cooled off at night, and the people were much happier.

But Mr. Sun felt badly about tricking his wife, so he invited her to visit him in the daytime sky every once in a while. Nowadays, you can sometimes see Mrs. Moon in the sky at the same time as Mr. Sun. She doesn’t shine quite so brightly as she once did, but but she is still there, travelling with her husband across the sky.

Sometimes, though, Mrs. Moon rises in the east just as Mr. Sun is setting in the west, and she stays up all night long. On these nights, she shines her very brightest, so that everyone can admire her beauty.