



Mask of the Black God: The Pleiades in Navajo Cosmology

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The Pleiades star cluster is easy to recognize. It is composed of several hundred young stars that are over 400 light years away. Only the brightest stars are easily visible to the unaided eye, appearing as a compact set of six jewels in the northern sky. Among the *Diné*, the people of the Navajo Nation, they are considered the most highly ordered constellation, their form and shape symbolizing the order of the heavens. The *Diné* call them *Dilyéhé*, a word that is loosely interpreted as “Sparkling Figure” or “Sparkling Particles” (Griffin-Pierce, 1992, p. 157–158).

The Pleiades also serve as a practical seasonal and temporal marker. Their twilight appearance in the east often coincides with the first autumn frost. In the fall and winter, the Pleiades can be used as a clock throughout the night. Ceremonial chanters may use the Pleiades to determine whether to add or delete songs so that the closing song coincides with the dawn. The Pleiades have been so important to the *Diné* that they have different names for the cluster as it moves across the sky, such as *Dilyéhé ‘eekai* for “the Pleiades have set” (Griffin-Pierce, 1992, p. 163).

In Navajo cosmology, the Pleiades are associated with Black God, who represents a group of powerful demigods collectively called *Haashch ‘éshzhini* (Griffin-Pierce, 1992, p. 158). Fathered by Fire and suckled by a Comet, Black God is the personification of Fire. He figures prominently as one of the original six gods in the Running-Pitch Place, the first of four worlds from which the *Diné* eventually emerged (Klah, 1942, p. 39). Today he is associated with the night and his spirit is invoked in a special version of a wintertime healing ceremony called the Nightway. The chanter impersonating Black God arrives at dawn on the ninth and final day. He carries a fire-drill and shredded bark^[1], all from a cedar tree which has been hit by lightning, from which he will make many fires (Matthews, 1995, p. 27). He is recognized by a buckskin mask that is blackened by sacred charcoal, save for several white markings: a full moon for a mouth, a crescent moon in the center of his forehead, and the Pleiades on his left temple (see figure above, from Haile, 1977, p. 3).

There is one Navajo legend about Black God and the Pleiades as told to Father Haile by Upward Reachingway. It begins with Black God, who carries a fawn skin pouch containing unnamed star crystals:

When Black God entered the hogan of creation, people noticed that the Pleiades constellation was lodged at his ankle. In the hogan itself he stamped his foot vigorously which made the Pleid bound to his knee. Again he stamped his foot and caused the configuration to locate at his hip. His third tap brought the Pleiad to his right shoulder much to the amazement of the creators present. But when he stamped his foot the fourth time he located the Pleiad cluster along his left temple and “there” he said “it shall stay!” (Haile, 1977, p. 2)

This action confirms to the Holy People that Black God is solely responsible for “beautifying the ‘dark upper’ or sky” (Haile, 1977, p. 2). He then decorates the sky in an orderly way with the prominent and familiar constellations. Their light comes from a special igniter-star he provides from his own Fire. Then he sprinkles the sky with the Milky Way.

But the spiritual fabric of Navajo philosophy and everyday life is a natural balance between order and chaos. Thus, Coyote, forever the Trickster, enters the story:

He [Black God/Fire God] was about to resume his seat when the coyote approached him saying: “What are you doing, my grandchildren, you haven’t said a word to me!” “See for yourself what we have done,” said the Fire god. Now the Fire god was in the habit of crossing his legs under him when sitting, and then placed his pouch under his foot. Before he was able to do this the coyote had snatched the pouch from him and, emptying its contents, blew them over the sky. “That explains why only the stars put there by Fire god have a name and those scattered at random by coyote are nameless.” Just one star remained in his pouch and this the coyote carefully placed in the south, calling it ... the monthless star, which people call now the “coyote star.” (Haile, 1977, p. 4)

And so the Pleiades rank high on the list of Navajo constellations. They shine prominently throughout the long winter nights, conspicuous by their tight and bright stellar arrangement. According to the Diné, they share the “dark upper” with the other highly ordered constellations that were placed by Black God, and the random but numerous unnamed stars attributed to the Coyote. The fine and tiny structure of the Pleiades contrasts with the vast expanse of sky, making the Pleiades a microcosmic symbol of the orderly universe—the universe that is the mask of Black God.

Questions and Activities

1. What traditions do you know that tell the story of the creation of the stars and the constellations? Briefly describe one, if you can.
2. What is the significance of Black God’s stamping his foot and deliberately placing the Pleiades up on his face?
3. Find the Pleiades on your star map. What is the approximate Right Ascension and Declination of this star cluster? In what constellation is it located?
4. What are some guideposts or “star-hopping” techniques that you can use to help find the Pleiades? Your answer can be in words or in a diagram.
5. Window Rock, AZ (latitude $35^{\circ} 04'$ North; longitude $109^{\circ} 03'$ West) is the seat of tribal government for the Navajo Nation and will be your location for questions 6–9. What does its latitude tell you about the location and orientation of Polaris and the celestial equator for a local observer?
6. According to the case, the first autumn frost occurs when the Pleiades are visible in the east after sunset. As observed from Window Rock, approximately on what date would this occur?
7. For a Nightway ceremony held on January 5th, what is the local time in Window Rock when the Pleiades transit? What will be the approximate local time when they set?
8. The Diné have a name for the Pleiades when they are highest in the sky: *Dilyéhé wók’ aa haaskai* (Griffin-Pierce, 1992, p. 163). What is the maximum altitude of *Dilyéhé wók’ aa haaskai* as observed from Window Rock? What would your latitude in the Northern Hemisphere have to be for you to see the Pleiades exactly on your zenith? What North American location corresponds to this latitude?
9. Griffin-Pierce states that the Coyote Star is called the monthless star because it is in the heavens for “less than one month” (1992, p. 87). Given the view of the sky as observed from Window Rock, what bright star may be the Coyote Star?

10. When is the best time to observe the Pleiades from your location today? Please give the location in the sky (rising in the east, transiting in the south, setting in the west, etc.) for this time. If the Pleiades cannot be seen, explain why.

References

- Griffin-Pierce, T. (1992). *Earth is My Mother, Sky is My Father*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
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- Klah, H. (1942). *Navajo Creation Myth*. Recorded by M. C. Wheelright. Santa Fe: Museum of Navajo Ceremonial Art.
- Matthews, W. (1995). *The Night Chant*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press. Originally published 1902.

End Note

- [1] The fire-drill is the shaft and the stick that are rubbed together to make fire. The shredded bark is the tinder.