

THE COSMIC HUNT: VARIANTS OF A SIBERIAN – NORTH-AMERICAN MYTH*

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Abstract

The mythological motif of the Cosmic Hunt is peculiar to Northern and Central Eurasia and for the Americas but seems to be absent in other parts of the globe. Two distinct Eurasian versions demonstrate North-American parallels at the level of minor details which could be explained only by particular historical links between corresponding traditions. The first version (three stars of the handle of the Big Dipper are hunters and the dipper itself is an animal; Alcor is a dog or a cooking pot) connects Siberian (especially Western Siberian) traditions with the North-American West (Salish, Chinook) and East (especially with the Iroquois). The second version (the Orion's Belt represents three deer, antelopes, mountain sheep or buffaloes; the hunter is Rigel or other star below the Orion's Belt; his arrow has pierced the game and is seen either as Betelgeuze or as the stars of Orion's Head) connects the South-Siberian – Central-Eurasian mythologies with traditions of North-American West – Southwest. Both variants unknown in Northeast Asia and in Alaska probably date to the time of initial settling of the New World. The circum-Arctic variant(s) (hunter or game are associated with Orion or the Pleiades) are represented by neighbouring traditions which form an almost continuous chain from the Lapps to the Polar Inuit. This version could be brought across the American Arctic with the spread of Tule Eskimo.

Keywords: comparative, Siberian, Central Asian, American Indian, Eskimo mythology; star names in folk tradition; settling of America

The mythological motif of the Cosmic Hunt (F59.2 according to S. Thompson's index (Thompson 1955–1958)) is defined as follows: certain stars and constellations are interpreted as hunters, their dogs, and game animals, killed or pursued. This motif forms the core of the tales typical for northern and central Eurasia and for the Americas but is rarely, if at all, known on other continents. In the folklore of the aborigines of Australia only some texts from Victoria have any relation to our theme. According to them, two brothers kill a cannibal emu. One of the stars is considered to be its eye and the dark patch between the Southern Cross and Centaurus its body (Waterman 1987: 99, no. 3860). No hunt is described, and the emu is not a game but an enemy, a monster.

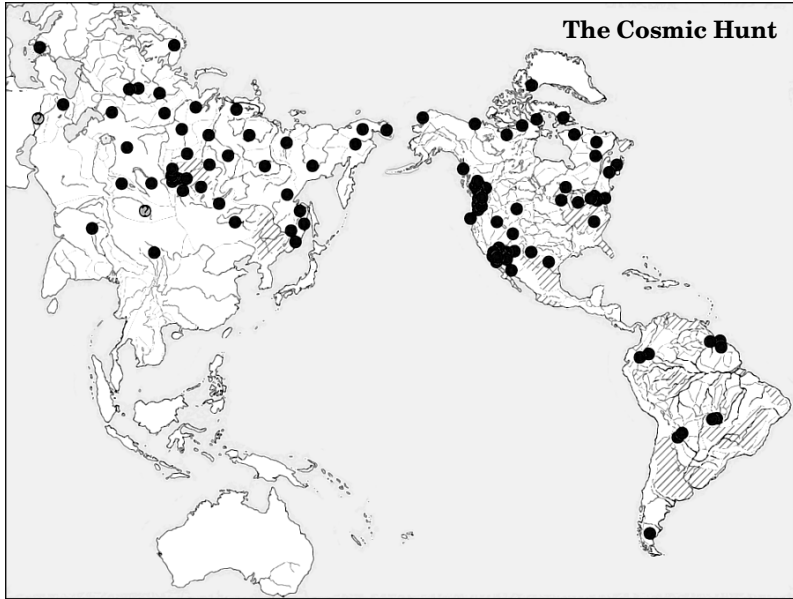


Figure 1. Area distribution of the Cosmic Hunt tales in the Old and in the New Worlds. For shaded areas data is not available or unprocessed.

We can conclude that the spread of the Cosmic Hunt motif itself is evidence in favour of mythological links between Siberia and the Americas (Fig. 1). Such links become more specific as to their area distribution if we address the particular variants of the motif (Figs. 4–5).

The combinations of stars which form constellations recognized by the Europeans and by people of other continents rarely coincide. Only Orion, the Pleiades, and (in the Northern Hemisphere) the Big Dipper have such characteristic outlines that they play some role in most of the world mythologies (Gibbon 1964: 1972). However, the relative stability of the composition of these constellations makes the diversity of their associations even more obvious. Among the Munda and Dravidian groups of Western Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, the Big Dipper is a bed with one leg broken off (Elwin 1938: 156; 1939: 335; Roy & Roy 1937: 431), among the Muskogean of the American Southeast, it is a canoe (Swanton 1928: 478), among the Californian Numic Indians it is a net put out

by the Rabbit (Driver 1937: 87), among the Alaskan and Western Canadian Athabaskans it is a one-legged man (Jenness 1934: 248–249, no. 66; McClelland 1975: 78; Nelson 1983: 39; Teit 1919: 228–229, no. 5). For most of the Indians of Guyana, Orion is a one-legged man, while the Yupic Eskimo of Alaska interpret the Big Dipper as poles with skin ropes tied to them (Nelson 1899: 449). Such examples are truly numerous.

As for the particular form of the hunt, the communal hunt with many animals driven by a crowd of people is never described. The celestial hunters always pursue the only game animal or a small group or such animals. For example, in a myth of the Carrier Athabaskans of British Columbia, the stars of the Big Dipper are the hunters and the Pleiades are the caribou (Jenness 1934: 137–141, no. 7). Usually the hunters pursue one big mammal such as a bear, an elk, a deer, an antelope, a mountain sheep, or a tapir. Only in the myths of the Chacoan and Patagonian Indians of South America is the game a big bird, the rhea.

THE FIRST (WESTERN-SIBERIAN) VARIANT

The first variant of the Cosmic Hunt is conditionally named the Western Siberian one. Several men pursue an elk (in most of Eurasian versions) or a bear (in most American tales), the hunters being associated with the stars of the handle of the Big Dipper, and the animal with the dipper itself. As a Polar constellation, the Big Dipper could easily attract the interest of the people of the Northern Hemisphere, but the stable association of the hunters and of the animal with certain stars cannot be due to this fact alone. Besides, in the Arctic where the Big Dipper is seen best of all, it does not play any role in the Cosmic Hunt tales.

The peculiarity of this variant of the myth is much strengthened by the fact that a weak star near Mizar (the second star of the handle) is interpreted as a cooking pot carried by one of the hunters (see Figs. 2, 4). Such a motif is known to the Khanty (Lukina 1990: 69, no. 9; Potanin 1883: 778), the Selkup (Prokofeva 1961: 64–65; 1976: 198), the Ket (Alekseenko 1976: 84–85), the Khakas (Radlov 1907: 273–274, no. 181) and to the western (but not to the southeastern) Evenk (Vasilevich 1936: 274–275, no. 2; 1959: 162–163). In America it is found

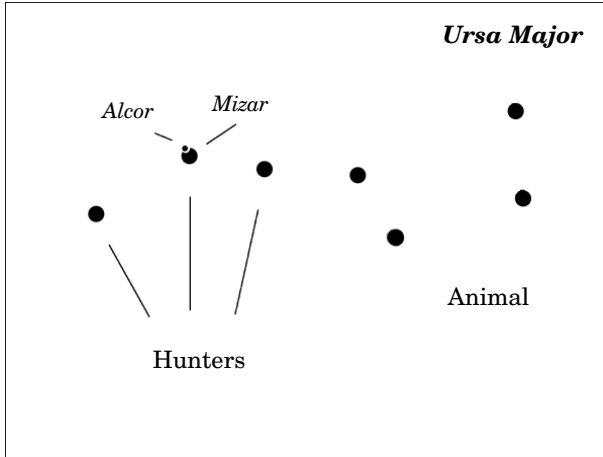


Figure 2. Schematic position of the main stars of the Big Dipper.

again among the Iroquois, both the northern (Smith 1883: 81), in particular, the Seneca (Curtin 2001: 503–504; Curtin & Hewitt 1918: 276–277, no. 54), and the southern Iroquoian speakers, i.e. the Cherokee (Hagar 1906: 357). The Cherokee are Iroquoian speakers but they are not Iroquois proper. These are the Seneca, the Cayuga, the Oneida, the Onondaga, and the Mohawk, the tribes who joined together to form the Iroquois Confederacy. So this allows to presume the existence of the motif at least at the time of the Iroquois language unity, because the Northern and the Southern Iroquois were not in direct contact in historic times.

There are other mythologies in which the four stars of the Big Dipper represent an animal (or a storehouse which the animal has approached), and the three stars of the handle are described as the hunters. Such ideas are recorded among the Orochon Evenks, the Udeghe, and the Oroch of the Russian Far East (Avrorin & Kozminski 1949: 328; Bereznitski 2003: 80; Mazin 1984: 9–10; Podmaskin 1991: 12). In America, they were known to the Coastal and Interior Salish, including the Lillooet, Thompson, Shuswap (Elliott 1931: 180; Teit 1917a: 16, no. 3)¹, Hakcomelem (Boas 1916: 604, no. 61), Snohomish (Clark 1953: 149), Coeur d'Alene (Teit 1917b: 125–126, no. 3; Teit & Boas 1930: 178–179), and possibly, Twana

(Elmendorf 1960: 537). The same version was known to some Chinook groups, the neighbours of the Salish (Clark 1953: 153–155; Hines 1996: 32–35, no. 5). In eastern North America, the constellation was interpreted in the same way by the Mohawk Iroquois (Rustige 1988: 32–34) and by several Algonkian people to the west (the Fox) (Jones 1907: 71–75, no. 4) and to the east of the Iroquois (the Lenape, the Micmac, maybe to the Penobscot) (Gibbon 1972: 243; Hagar 1900: 93–97; Speck 1935b: 19). This interpretation of the Big Dipper is mentioned by the late 17th – early 18th century sources on the inhabitants of Eastern Canada and New England (Allen 1899: 423). For other Algonkian groups of the Midwest and Eastern Canada (Menomini, Ojibwa, Naskapi) the Big Dipper was a fisher (*Martes pennanti*) with an arrow stuck into its tail (Bloomfield 1928: 247–253, no. 86; Hagar 1900: 93–94; Speck 1925: 28–31; 1935a: 66–69).

In many of the versions described above, a certain weak star continues to play some role though its interpretation is different, being not a cooking pot but a dog of one of the hunters. In Siberia, such an interpretation is typical for the Orochon Evenk, the Udeghe and the Oroch, and in America, among the Salish, the Chinook, the Mohawk, the Lenape, and the Fox. In all cases when our sources are adequate enough, they identify this star with Alcor. On the star map, Alcor is very near to Mizar (second star of the handle) and the capability to see this weak star was always a test to prove one's sharp sight. It seems that Alcor was the smallest of the sky objects singled out in the pre-scientific era, the fact reflected in the Ancient and Medieval Chinese, Arab, and Latin texts (Allen 1899: 445–446; Gibbon 1964: 239)².

In connection with the Cosmic Star tale, the Big Dipper without the associations mentioned above (the handle as three hunters, Alcor as a pot or a dog) appears in several other Eurasian and North American stories. Interpretations found in the Khakas (seven foxes) (Aleksiev 1980: 87–88; Potanin 1893: 322), Nenets (elk) (Semenov 1994: 115), Ob-Ugrian (elk) (Lukina 1990: 67–69, no. 6; 297, no. 110; Okladnikov 1950: 299; Potanin 1893: 385), Evenk (elk) (Anisimov 1959: 15; Vasilevich 1959: 162–163) tales do not change the geography of the image in question, but the Ancient Greek (bear) (Pausanias: VIII 3, 3), Mari (she elk with her calf) (Potanin 1883: 713) and Chuvash examples (mounted hunters with their dogs) (Ashmarin 1984: 26) prove that the Cosmic Hunt myth describing with the Big

Dipper as the main sky object was known not only in Asia but also in Europe. In the Bering Sea region, the Koryak, the Kamchadal and the Aleuts identified the Big Dipper with a deer or elk (Bogoras 1939: 29; Krasheninnikov 1994: 22, 160; Potanin 1883: 942) but there is no data on any connection of this image with the Cosmic Hunt myth.

The second (Central-Asian) variant

The Turkic and Mongolian cases of the Central-Asian variant of the Cosmic Hunt myth were studied in detail by S. Nekliudov (1980). This variant is known across all the area from southern Siberia to India. The most important sky objects are the three stars of Orion's Belt interpreted as three deer or antelopes (see Figs. 3, 5). One of the neighboring stars is an arrow (or a bullet in later versions), shot by the hunter to hit the animals. Such texts, some of them rich in details, others not, are recorded among the Kazakhs (Potanin 1972: 54), the Kirgiz (Brudnyi & Eshmambetov 1989: 350), the Tibetans (Okladnikov 1950: 300 (based on G. N. Potanin's materials)), the Tuvinians (Diakonova 1976: 285; Potanin 1883: 206, no. 38n), the Altai (Garf & Kuchiiak 1978: 179–181; Nikiforov 1915: 251–252; Potanin 1883: 204, nos. 38b, 38c; Surazakov 1982: 127–128, 134), the Teleut (Potanin 1883: 204, no. 38a), the Telengt (ibid.: 204–205, nos. 38d, 38e), the Khakas (Butanaev 1975: 236–237; Butanaev & Butanaeva 2001: 59–61; Radlov 1907, N 181: 273–274), the Tofa (Katanov 1891: 51; Rassadin 1996: 9–10, no. 2), the Buriat (Zhambalova 2000: 283; Potanin 1883: 206, no. 38L; Khangalov 1960: 16, no. 10; Sharakhshinova 1980: 58), and the Mongol (Potanin 1883: 205, 38g). There is not enough data on the cosmography of Xinjiang but the existence of a Tibetan version enables to suggest that the area of the motif encompassed all Central Asia and that the Uigur were familiar with the story just as well as other Turkic-speaking peoples of the region. The Indian version is similar to the Central Asian ones, though not quite identical with them (Orion is a stag, three stars of Orion's Belt represents an arrow that has pierced the animal (Gibbon 1972: 245)). It could well have been brought to South Asia by the Indo-Arians. No Cosmic Hunt is known in China where the Big Dipper was a locus rather than a personage (Allen 1899: 435; Riftin 1980: 655–656). In western and eastern Siberia, the borderline between the Central-Asian and the Western-Siberian variants coincides with the fron-

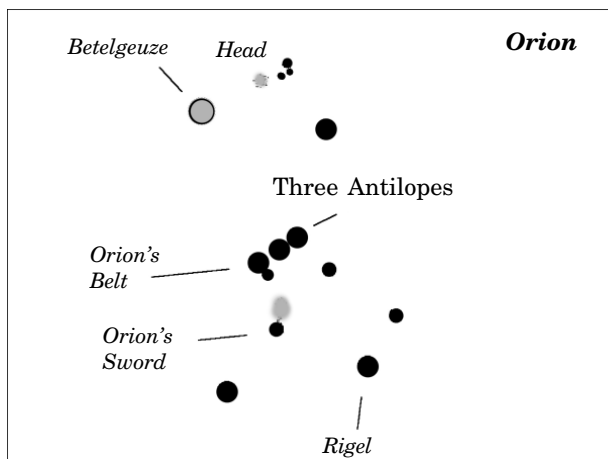


Figure 3. Schematic position of the main stars of the Orion.

tier between the Turkic and Mongolian people to the south, and the Uralic, Yenissei and Tungus people, to the The Cosmic Hunt: Variants of a Siberian – North-American Mythnorth. Both geographically and thematically, the Khakas version from Radlov's collection (Radlov 1907: 273–274, no. 181) is between the main types. Unlike other Khakas variants, it belongs to the West-Siberian type, but hunters pursue not an elk but two deer.

Just as the Western Siberian variant, the Central-Asian one has analogies in North America, in particular in the southwestern part of the continent across the Great Basin, Southern California, Northwestern Mexico, and the Great Southwest. Corresponding texts are recorded among different Yuman peoples, among the Seri (probably distantly related to the Yuma), among the tribes of the Numic and Tatic divisions of the Ute-Aztec family, and among some Apachean groups. The latter could hardly bring these ideas from their Canadian homeland but borrowed them from some of their Southwestern neighbors. Only the Algonkian Gros Ventre version (the Northern Plains) stands territorially slightly apart from the others. Among the Paviotso (Curtis 1976: 147–148; Lowie 1924: 232–234, nos. 12), Chemehuevi (Fowler 1995: 147–148), Yavapai (Gifford 1933a: 381–382, 413–414), Maricopa (Spier 1933: 146–147), Kiliwa (Meigs 1939: 69–78), and Gros Ventre (Kroeber 1908: 280) the Orion's

Belt represents three ungulates (mountain sheep, antelopes, buffaloes), pursued by hunters. Among the Mojave (Fowler 1995: 147), Tipai (Drucker 1937: 26), Cocopa (Gifford 1933b: 286), Seri (Kroeber 1931: 12), the Takic (Cahuilla, Luiseño, Cupeño) (Hooper 1920: 362; Drucker 1937: 26), Western Apache, Mescalero, Lipan and Southern Ute (Gifford 1940: 60, 155, no. 2266), three stars of Orion's Belt are interpreted as one single animal. When additional details are available, the Orion's Sword is always associated with the feathered tail of the arrow and the stars of the Orion's Head are the arrow tip. The stars identified with the hunter are in every case below Orion's Belt. That is also typical for all Turkic and Mongolian versions. The only difference is that in Asia the arrow that has pierced animals is considered to be smeared with their blood and is accordingly associated not with the Orion's Head but with Betelgeuse, the bright red star slightly to the left. Similar interpretation is, however, included in some American versions. At least the Cahuilla identified the hunter with Rigel which is on the other side of Orion's Belt directly opposite Betelgeuse. Identified with Rigel, the hunter has to shoot in the direction of Betelgeuse. In the Apachean myths, Betelgeuse grew red from anger when the arrow missed its aim (the mountain sheep) and almost hit this star.

The association of three bright stars of Orion's Belt with three animals or persons could well appear independently (cf. Spanish *Tres Marías*). However, the arrow tip associated with one of the bright celestial objects above the Orion's Belt (Orion's Head or Orion's Shoulder, i.e. Betelgeuse) is too specific to be a random coincidence.

The third (Circum Arctic) variant

This series of tales is not so uniform as the two previous ones, and consists of two or three separate versions in all of which the Orion and/or the Pleiades are associated not with the animals but with the hunters. Among the North-Alaskan Inupiaq, the hunters (the Pleiades) pursue polar bear (Aldebaran) (Gibbon 1964: 245; Simpson 1875: 272). The Mackenzie River Eskimo mention dogs in the sky which accompany hunters (Ostermann 1942: 78). In this case, no association with constellations is provided, but among the Copper Eskimo, closely related to the Mackenzie groups, men who pursue the bear are the stars of the Orion's Belt (Rasmussen 1932: 23). For

the Netsilik Eskimo farther to the east, hunters and their dog pursue a bear and are associated with the Pleiades (Rasmussen 1931: 211, 263, 385). For the Iglulik and the Polar Eskimo, the Pleiades are dogs and a bear which they encircled (Holtved 1951: 50–55, no. 6; Kroeber 1899: 173–174, no. 10), while for the Labrador Eskimo bear and dogs seem to be identified with the Orion (Kroeber 1899: 173, no. 10). For the Baffin Land Eskimo, Betelgeuse was the bear, Orion's Belt represents the hunters, and Orion's Sword was the dog-sledge (Boas 1888: 636–637).

All these Cosmic Hunt stories have been recorded among the Inuit – Inupiaq branch of the Eskimo with no such a story in Alaskan Yupic folklore. Like many other tales, the Inuit-Inupiaq Cosmic Hunt myths find parallels not in Southwestern Alaska, but to the west of the Bering Strait. Among the Chukchi and the Koryak, the Orion (i.e. the hunter) pursues the reindeer associated with the Pleiades or Cassiopeia (Bogoras 1924: 243; 1939: 25, 28–29). Much further to the west, the Lapp version is the nearest parallel for the Chukchi one (Billson 1918: 180; Kharuzin 1890: 347; Potanin 1893: 328, no. 87). According to it, the hunter is also Orion, and the elk or reindeer pursued by him is Cassiopeia.

The Yukagir cosmology is poorly known. The Mestizos of Markovo (with a probable Yukagir substratum) describe the Big Dipper as an elk pursued by three brothers and three sisters (Diachkov 1992: 232), their story being somewhat similar to the Evenk ideas. In Yakut myths the Orion pursues the elk (Ergis 1974: 135; Seroshevski 1896: 660), the Big Dipper is not mentioned. The Yakut tradition is heterogeneous. Some versions describe a lonely hunter whose ski path turned into the Milky Way, which is typical for some Western Siberian, Tungus, Negidal and Ugedhe-Oroch stories. Other Yakut tales not relevant to the origin of the Milky Way, describe a group of hunters. In America the interpretation of the Milky Way as a ski path is present across Alaska and British Columbia among the Tlingit (De Laguna 1972: 875–879; Swanton 1909: 102, no. 31; 296–298, nos. 96–97), Central Yupic (Krenov 1951: 194; Nelson 1899: 449), Ingalik (Vanstone 1978: 61) and Tahltan (Teit 1919: 229, no. 6), but only among the Tlingit is this image connected with the Cosmic Hunt tale. Among the Even (Lamut) three hunters who pursue mountain sheep are associated with the Pleiades (Burykin 2001: 113, no. 22). The Pleiades

mentioned in one of the Nganasan versions are hunters who catch the reindeer with a net (Popov 1984: 48).³ The association of hunters with Orion or with the Pleiades is a feature shared by Yakut, Nganasan, Even and the Chikchi – Inuit versions.

Conclusions

The first and the second variants of the Cosmic Hunt tale demonstrate Eurasian–North-American parallels at the level of minor details which could be explained only by particular historical links between the corresponding traditions. According to the first variant, three stars of the handle of the Big Dipper are hunters and the dipper itself is an animal, while a weak star of the handle, most probably, Alcor, occupies a special place in this picture. Its association with a dog and especially with the cooking pot carried by the second hunter is highly specific and could not emerge independently in Asia and in America.⁴

The second variant of the Cosmic Hunt contains such specific details as the association of the three stars of Orion's Belt with three deer, antelopes or mountain sheep and especially the association of the hunter's arrow (or its point) with Betelgeuse or with the group of stars which form the Orion's Head.

Estimating the possible time sequence of the penetration of the described variants of the myth into the New World, we should take into consideration how distant from the Bering Strait the corresponding areas are. The deeper into inner Asia and inner America, the less probable is a recent spread of the myths. The Western Siberian and Central-Asian variants are differently localized both in the Old and in the New World. To understand relations between them, we should remember another Eurasian–North American motif, i.e. the transformation of seven brothers into the Big Dipper. Its area in the Old World largely coincides with the area of the second variant of the Cosmic Hunt. In America, it occupies the Plains, i.e. is inbetween the Salishan (the western) and Iroquois – Algonkian (the eastern) parts of the area of the tale about three hunters who pursue a bear (Berezkin 2003: 100). The Western-Siberian variant of the Cosmic Hunt contains details which are also found in the Seven Star Brothers story. In both cases, the principal stars of the Big

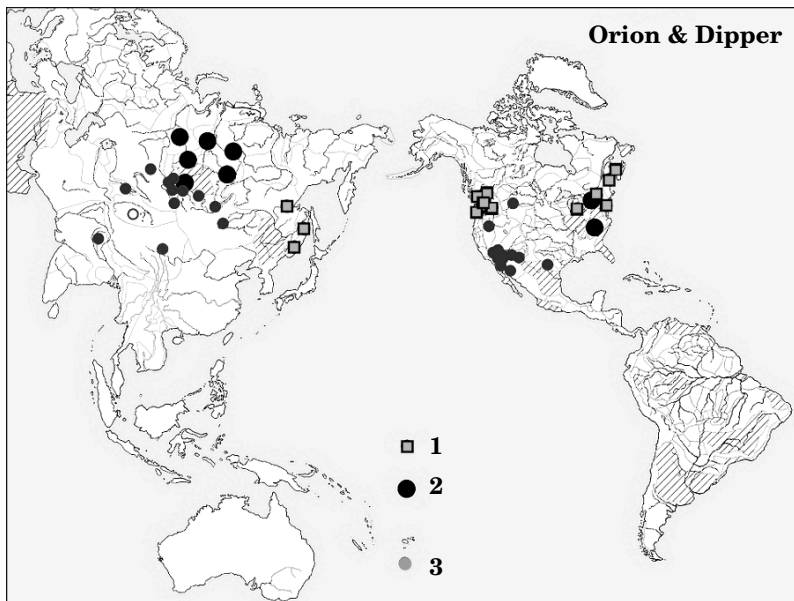


Figure 4. Area distribution of the first and the second variants of the Cosmic Hunt tale (the Big Dipper is three hunters and their dog). 1 – three stars of the handle are hunters, dipper is an animal, 2 – Alcor is a cooking pot. 3. – Orion’s Belt is three or one ungulate animal(s); either Betelgeuse or the Orion’s Head is the hunter’s arrow.

Dipper (all seven or only three stars of the handle) are separate persons and not one man or object like a carriage, a bed, etc. In the Seven Brothers tales of the Plains Indians, Alcor also plays its special part being identified with a younger sister of the brothers (Blackfoot (Spence 1985: 182–184)), their younger brother or child (Crow (Lowie 1918: 126), Cheyenne (Erdoes & Ortiz 1984: 205–209), Wichita (Dorsey 1904: 74–80, no. 10)) or with the sister’s dog (Sarsi (Simms 1904: 181–182), Crow (Lowie 1918: 205–211)).

The Central-Asian variant of the Cosmic Hunt myth and the Seven Star Brothers’ motif could have been brought to America by migrational episodes which were close to each other in time. Most probably, it was the time when a large set of motifs recorded across Central Eurasia, on one hand, and across the Plains and Midwest, on the other, was brought across the Bering Strait (Berezkin 2003;

2004). The absence of these motifs in South America makes improbable their connection with the initial stages of the settling in the New World. As for the Western Siberian variant, geographically localized nearer to Chukotka and Alaska, it could have reached North America later. In both cases, however, we speak about the time before the spread of the Eskimo, Paleoasiatic, Tlingit and Athabaskan groups across Eastern and Western Beringia. The problem of Paleoasiatic origins is beyond the scope of this paper, still we should notice a fact which can direct the search. Among the Chukchi, the Orion was considered to be a humpback since the time when his jealous wife (constellation of Leo) hit him with a heavy board because of the attention he paid to the Pleiades women (Bogoras 1939: 24). A similar plot was recorded among the “Tangut”, i.e. the Tibetans of Chinghai. Gachari (a certain red star), a jealous husband of the Pleiades, broke Orion’s back with a stone because of his supposed interest in Gachari’s wife (Potanin 1893: 327). Such a parallel is not a proof of any special connections between the Chukchi and the Tibetans, but it still is an argument in favour of the inner Asian homeland of some of the Paleoasiatic ancestors.

In the case of the third, circumpolar variant of the Cosmic Hunt, it is totally possible that the Lapp and the Chukchi versions which identify the hunter with the Orion have preserved the form of the myth widespread across the Far Northern Asia before the relatively recent migration of the Samoyed, Turkic and Tungus peoples. The absence of this version among the Yupic and its presence among the Inuit-Inupiak make one suggest that it had penetrated the Eastern Arctic only after the BC/AD transition together with the neo-Eskimo Thule tradition. The Inuit Eskimo texts have little in common with the Cosmic Hunt tales of the American Indians. The Arctic variant with the Orion being the hunter is separated from other American versions by the Subarctic where in the Athabaskan mythologies the “astral code” is quite undeveloped (McKenna 1959: 110). No Cosmic Hunt tales have been also recorded among the Muskogean and other non-Iroquois peoples of the Southeast or in Mexico (besides the Seri) and Lower Central America. This fact supports the hypothesis about different Eurasian origins of the separate groups of American natives, not only the Eskimo, the Aleuts, and the Na-Dene, but of different Amerindian tribes.

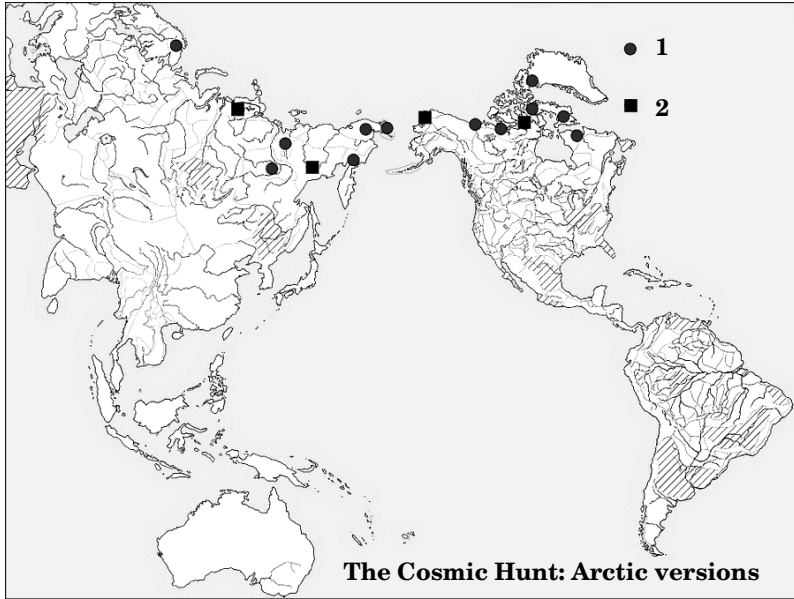


Figure 5. Area distribution of the third variant of the Cosmic Hunt tale. 1 – hunter is the Orion, game animal is Cassiopeia or the Pleiades; 2 – hunter is the Pleiades.

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Comments

¹ The published Thompson and Shuswap texts are sparse in details, but take into consideration the language and cultural proximity of both groups to the Lillooet and the basic similarity of the Cosmic Hunt myths in all these cases, the identification of the handle with three hunters and the dipper itself with the animal for Thompson and Shuswap is very plausible.

² It is possible that the Christian and Muslim legend about “The Seven Sleeping Boys of Efesos” was also connected with the interpretation of the Big Dipper as seven men and their dog. According to the widespread version, six righteous lads ran away from an impious king and hid themselves in a cave accompanied by a shepherd with his dog whom they met on the way. They slept for many centuries, awoke, told their story and died. There is a version with seven lads and a dog which went after them (Snesev 1983: 131–135). Though the dog does not play a significant role in this story, it is persistently mentioned, possibly because of the etiological nature of all the tale (the dog being the weakest star of the constellation).

³ The Pleiades represent a group of hunters in all those Amazonian Cosmic Hunt myths in which the corresponding constellation could be identified. These are Akavaio or Kariña (Roth 1915: 265–266, no. 211), Kaliña (Magaña 1983: 32, no. 1), Siona and Secoya (Vickers 1989: 161–167), Kamaiura (Münzel 1973: 187–190; Villas Boas & Villas Boas 1973: 171–173). Such a parallel is not, of course, enough to suggest common roots for Siberian and Amazonian versions.

⁴ If so, we must conclude that the distant ancestors of the Iroquois were able to cook meat in pots before their migration to the New World. There is no doubt that vessels of wood, skin, waterproof baskets with liquid made to boil with hot stones thrown into it, were used well before the invention of ceramics. A possible argument in favour of such a hypothesis is similar spelling of words which mean ‘vessel’ in Indoeuropean, Uralic, Dravidian and Yukagir languages (Napolskikh 1989). However, it could be also a result of a relatively late spread of a cultural term for ceramic pot (Vladimir Napolskikh, from personal communication, 2004). The problem remains unresolved, and the data of comparative mythology are of interest for its investigation.

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