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# Mountain Sheep in the Sky: Orion's Belt in Great Basin Mythology

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*Mountain Sheep in the Sky is a referent phrase used by older Numic people to refer to the stars of the constellation Orion. Fragments of the tale of a hunt in which these stars are featured were recorded in the Great Basin from before 1900 to the 1940s in different variants. An attempt is made to relate these fragments to demonstrate what may have been a widespread tale type. Its demise may be related to the general demise of star tales—perhaps due to shifts in native educational priorities.*

**N**ATIVE peoples of the Great Basin were keen observers of many types of natural phenomena, including stars and other celestial bodies. At one time, many of these observations, particularly those involving the constitution of constellations, were encoded in myth or sacred traditions. As has been observed elsewhere in the world, it is not uncommon for mythological beings, whether animal or human, to become transformed into stars, as well as the moon and the sun (Jettmar 1962:336). A familiar example from the Great Basin and western North America is the association of the Pleiades with the story of Coyote's lust for his daughters, a tale still largely intact and recorded by several authors in the 1920s and 1930s. In order to avoid Coyote's incestuous advances, his daughters (along with their mother and sometimes his son) flee to the sky to become the stars in this grouping (Thompson 1929:304-305). To this can be added other well-known and widespread myths involving the sky or stars, such as Cotton-tail Shoots the Sun (Hultkrantz 1986:639), some lesser known myths, such as Frog in the Moon (Kelly 1932:200; Fowler and Fowler 1971:221), and the topic of this article, Mountain Sheep in the Sky.

Mountain Sheep in the Sky probably had several versions, most of which were becoming fragmentary in the 1920s and 1930s when re-

corded by Lowie (1924), Kelly (1932, 1932-34) and Park (1933-40). The feature that unites the versions, however, is that all are somehow associated with the stars in the constellation Orion, if not specifically Orion's Belt. I first became acquainted with this material the first year I did fieldwork among the Southern Paiute people in 1962. Jimmy Timmican, George Pollock, and I were camped one dark night in the Henry Mountains. We had just settled into our sleeping bags when Mr. Timmican, lying on his back, remarked: "There's mountain sheep up there, you know. I don't know much about it, but there is a hunter trying to get them. You can see them if you look hard, way up there. There's three. Look like mountain sheep." As I scrambled for my notebook and glasses, I soon realized that what I wrote down really did not make much difference as, apart from the Big Dipper and the Milky Way, I did not know one star grouping from another. Even if I did see mountain sheep, I would not know what to call them or how to find them again.

I did not think much more about the Mountain Sheep in the Sky until a few years later when I came across a brief manuscript in the old Bureau of American Ethnology Archives (now the National Anthropological Archives) written by George O. Haller, a member of the Ives expedition, from a post on the lower Colorado

River in 1861 (Haller MS). In writing to George Gibbs of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Haller had several things to impart about the Mojave people, and particularly about their observations of the stars (Pleiades, Dipper, Polaris, etc.). He stated the following, providing as well the illustration in Figure 1:

But their great constellation is composed of the interior stars of Orion, of Sirius, and of Canopus, a large star, having so great a southern declination as to only at its meridian appear a few degrees above the horizon in the south. The stars in the face of Orion, and in the fermile of Orion's sword, are nearly in a right line drawn from the former stars to Canopus. The Indians call the three bright stars, in the belt of Orion, the "Ah-mo" or Mountain Sheep. The star furthest from Sirius is his eye, the middle one the wound, and the nearest one, the Goat's [sheep's] anus. [Then follows his attempt to deal with a scatological reference, by drawing certain parallels to Greek traditions.] . . . But Canopus, is a man, an old hunter, whom they call "Ah-mo-co-patch-u—the Sheep Hunter." He has just shot the Ahmo, with an almighty big arrow, the feathers to which are represented by the three stars in the ferula of Orion's sword, which pierced the Ahmo, and comes through at the wound (the middle star in the Belt,) and the point of the arrow is seen in those three stars (\*\*\*) in Orion's face. The pierced sheep is running all the time westward, and Sirius, who is a young man, son of "Ahmocopatchu" (Canopus) and called by them "Ah-mo-co-to-where-ah"—the Sheep Trailer, is on the trail and follows up the Ahmo for his father.

Although the above relates to the Mojave, and apart from the definition of the constellation is only fragmentary as a tale, there are some intriguing parallels to similar tales among Numic groups. For example, Carobeth Laird (1976:91-92) noted the following, as related to her by George Laird in the 1920s:

Nagawi, Mountain Sheep (plural). Orion's Belt . . . The Mountain Sheep in the middle is the largest, and he had been shot by a blind man on the earth. Nagawi and the following five names of stars or groups of stars were tied together in some tremendous ancient tale which George

Laird had never heard in its entirety. Huu Wis?yah . . . Arrow's Feathers. These are the three stars in Orion's Sword . . . The arrow referred to is the one with which the blind man shot the Mountain Sheep. Huu Win?nawa . . . Arrow's Flint. The cluster of stars that marks Orion's head. Tihowagantimi, Ambushers. Betelgeuse and Rigel. These were the ambushers in the great hunt for the Mountain Sheep. Muhwinti, Leader (the leader of the hunt). Aldebaran. Tihnapiganti. Follower. Sirius. This follower was the father of the Mountain Sheep who was shot.

Although there are some discrepancies between the two outlines, one of which is whether there is one mountain sheep, as in the Mojave version, or three, as in the Chemehuevi, and a second as to just what stars are involved and what roles they play, the two are similar enough to suspect a common tale (mountain sheep, arrow, arrow point, trailer, hunter, etc.). However, much is still unknown about the tale other than that it involved a great hunt. The addition of a blind hunter appears new.

In her unpublished field notes on the Chemehuevi and Southern Paiute gathered from 1932 to 1934, Isabel Kelly (1932-34) transcribed several interviews with individuals involving constellations in which the Mountain Sheep in the Sky are featured. In all of her versions, the number of sheep remains at three (although occasionally the three are mountain sheep, deer, and antelope). In one Las Vegas interview, she reported the following (Kelly 1932-34:18:62):

Orion cluster: Belt is Nagau, 3 mt. sheep; Tirinapugant (follower) and Toxoaxant (concealed marksman) shown [see Fig. 2]; also Puiat (blind), who is the man who shot the sheep; he got the middle one. This star is as bright as the others. The 3 small stars are Winapi (arrow point); and the sword appears to be the broken arrow, although she has not drawn it in.

And from a Chemehuevi consultant comes the following:

Naga: evidently Orion and associated stars. set-up given to right [see Fig. 3]. 2 upper stars appear first; are medium sized, called Tixawanti.



Fig. 1. Haller's (MS) 1861 drawing of the Mojave constellation *Ah-mo*, "The Goat." Courtesy of the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

The 3 small star groups are *Winapi*, arrow point. The 3 large stars are the mountain sheep. The 3 stars in line to left (definite on this) are *Wisiakoviv*, arrow. 2 small and 1 larger. Below, a lone star is *Tirinapuganti*, follower (stalker); this is *Gopher* (*mii*) [Kelly 1932-34:17:103].

The introduction of *Gopher* here is the first indication that the myth may come from *The Time When Animals Were People*. In nearly all versions, as near as we can tell, human actors are primary.

Kelly's accounts farther north within Southern Paiute country become even more fragmen-

tary, and consultants begin to refer to other participants. From a Moapa consultant: "Three stars (*Orion*?) called *nagau*; are all mt. sheep. A small star nearby is like an arrow. One big star at the bottom is called *Tirinadi*; one on the other side is called *Toxogad*. There are 7 brothers on top of the mt. sheep (*Pleiades*?)" (Kelly 1932-34:22:95). From *Paranagat Valley*: "*Tirinadi*, pursuers, 2 stars chasing 3 mt. sheep (*Orion's belt*)" (Kelly 1932-34:19:47). And from *St. George*: "They call it *na??an*, mountain sheep. They show up in the fall, in the east. The three are antelope, deer, and

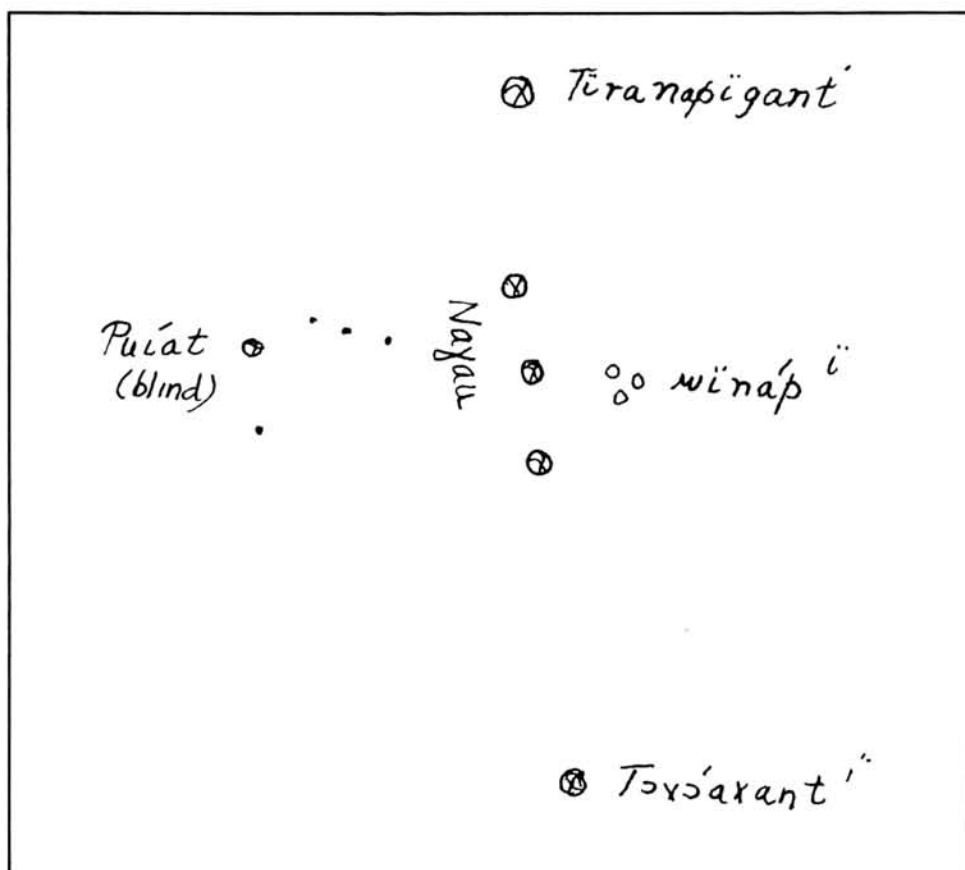


Fig. 2. Kelly's (1932-34:18:61a) Las Vegas Southern Paiute diagram of the constellation *Nagau*, "Mountain Sheep."

mountain sheep" (Kelly 1932-34:21:52).

At Kaibab, the accounts take a different turn, introducing Coyote as a participant. Kelly (1964:137) began: "Orion's belt apparently called *naagangw* (mountain sheep). 'There are three stars; you see them in the fall. They were not real mountain sheep. They are some Coyote made out of little stones he picked up. Then Mountain Lion had a son who killed the sheep. Coyote came along and said, "My son killed them;" there is half a circle of stars around these sheep; they are Indians trying to get the sheep.' " Of another Kaibab consultant, Kelly (1964:138) stated that "S apparently recognized Orion's belt as mountain sheep and thought the sword was Coyote's arrow; knew no associated tale. Had heard that one star, not identified,

was 'the arrow of Coyote's son.' " One last Southern Paiute account, also recorded among the Kaibab some 75 years earlier by J. W. Powell (Fowler and Fowler 1971:95), noted that: "Many of the persons of this ancient mythology are now stars. Ursa Major is called Na-gats. The dipper in the Milky Way is his wife, they were separated far in the heavens because they quarreled when on earth. Orion is called the Hunter, and the jewels in his sword are the arrows he is shooting at the antelope."

It is not certain that much can be made of these data with reference to reconstructing a myth or myths from which they originated. A fairly careful search of the recorded Southern Paiute literature for tales involving gopher, coyote, mountain lion, or mountain sheep did

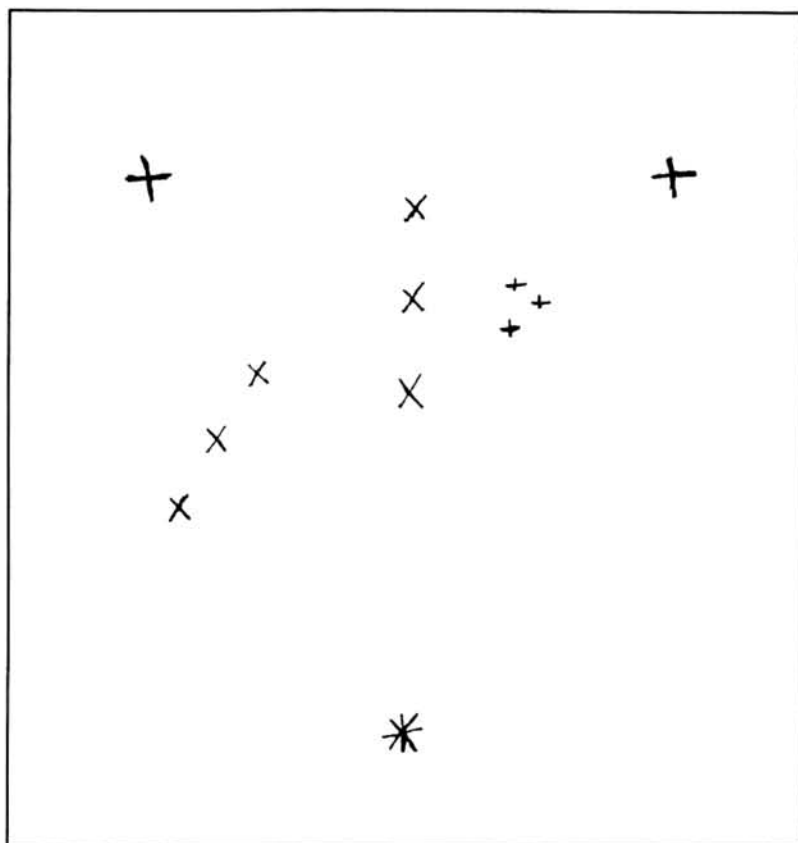


Fig. 3. Kelly's (1932-34:17:103) Chemehuevi diagram of the constellation *Naga*, "Mountain Sheep."

not yield any obvious source, either in whole or in part. However, given that most of this rather meager data base was not recorded until the 1920s or 1930s, it is possible, as Kelly (1932-34) and Laird (1976) have implied, that the tale may not have existed in fuller versions by this time.

Additional information elsewhere in the Great Basin seems to suggest related yet variant versions, still commonly involving mountain sheep and Orion's belt, or at least a constellation featuring three aligned stars. Lowie (1924), Kelly (1938), and Park (1933-40) each recorded Northern Paiute tales in which three mountain sheep (sometimes deer or antelope) are transformed into stars. These tales, however, have moral overtones involving the proper conduct of

a wife, who because of her misdeeds (usually a lack of industriousness in food gathering), loses her two polyandrous husbands, as well as her baby. The three go up into the sky and become the stars while she is left to be the "chaser." As explained to Park (1933-40:6:14) by a consultant at Walker River:

They turned into stars that are seen all the year round. They come up in the south. There are three stars close together, a little one in the middle (baby). This is called *woyuadi*. There is one big star far behind the three, that is the woman. It is called *tunigidi*, chaser.

And further, as to the moral:

Every time the people go up into the mountains to the south, husbands and wives have trouble with each other. It is all because of this. Sometimes



a woman runs away and her husband follows her and brings her back. It happens that way on account of these stars [Park 1933-40:6:15].

Northern and Western Shoshone versions of similar tales involving a woman who shirks her duty, mountain sheep, husbands, and a baby are not overtly about stars, but are probably related. Lowie (1909:288) related a version in which the woman continues to trail the three until Coyote intervenes, at which time he and his friends hunt and kill the sheep, thus claiming the woman. In a Gosiute tale recorded by J. W. Powell in 1873 (Fowler and Fowler 1971), the widow of Owl tests a series of suitors' hunting prowess and generosity, in one instance transforming herself into three mountain sheep. The sheep later turn into lice, all neatly pinned to one arrow. Although the latter motif may not be part of the Mountain Sheep in the Sky, this subplot may have a related origin. Although there are different versions within the three Numic linguistic subbranches, it is clear that some type of historical relationship may be suggested.

Two suggestions come to mind regarding all versions, and particularly their persistence—or lack thereof. The stronger association of the tale with mountain sheep, stars, and hunting among the Southern Paiute, and more particularly the southern areas of Southern Paiute country adjacent to the Yuman Mojave where it is also found, may stem from an old association for the myth and related star lore with the concept of hereditary hunting territories and songs so prominent in that region. If this were the case, one reason why the myth may have been passing from the scene by the 1920s and 1930s may be that those with a right to this cycle were also passing, or perhaps had already done so. Referring to the Mountain Sheep Song, Laird (1976: 14) observed that

The ritual use of the Mountain Sheep Song may have been confined to funerals or Crying Ceremonies (*Yagap̄i*) held for persons who belonged

to that group . . . . When sung ritually the singer could only be one who owned the song legitimately. But when sung for pleasure, to entertain the people, it might also be led by one who had "borrowed" it, that is, had learned it merely by hearing it sung and had no hereditary right to it.

By the 1930s, hereditary owners who knew the songs in their entirety were gone, according to George Laird (Laird 1976:14). Perhaps those who remained did not know full versions, or did not have the right to tell them.

As to what appears to be (perhaps falsely) a greater persistence in the north of a myth involving mountain sheep and Orion's belt—for example, among the Northern Paiute and to a lesser degree the Shoshone—a second observation is that perhaps in this region, for whatever reason, the tale became associated with practical lessons in morality—the proper conduct of wife toward husband and mother toward child. Unlike the southern tale, the plot of which we can only surmise involves a great hunting venture, perhaps by a blind man and his son, the northern version carries a more instructive message. Whereas great ability at hunting (regardless of whether there was hereditary ownership of the cycle) may not have had much practical value after the turn of the century, proper conduct within the family was worth stressing. The common persistence of other tales involving incest and the results of other types of improper behavior in the body of materials collected in the 1920s, 1930s, and more recently, is certainly suggestive of such a pattern. Undoubtedly, other factors were at work as well, as they always are in matters of culture change.

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