

George Ironstrack—Assistant Director of the Myaamia Center

Assistant Director of the Myaamia Center at Miami University, George Ironstrack covers several important topics relating to eclipses within this interview. Ironstrack begins with introducing himself and how he identifies as a citizen of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma. The conversation continues with discussing the lunar calendar projects, cultural revitalization, and the lack of traditions about the moon.

Interviewee: George Ironstrack (GI)

Interviewers: Peter Limbert (PL), Ernest Okine (EO), Bekah Shively (BS)

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[START OF INTERVIEW]

PL: [00:00:01] So, thank you for coming and meeting, well not coming physically, but meeting with us today. Would you be able to introduce yourself for us real quick?

GI: [00:00:10] Sure, just before I do that, just to get everyone's names in the room, it's Peter, Rebecca, and Ernest? Yes. Okay, perfect. [Speaking in Myaamia, transcription checked by George] iihia aya, tipeewe noontoolakakoki noonki kaahkiihkwa, niila myaamia mihtohseenia, meemeeshhkia weenswiaani. It's good to hear all of you today and see you on Zoom. My name is George Ironstrack, and I'm a citizen of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, and the Assistant Director of the Myaamia Center at Miami University.

PL: [00:00:42] Awesome. So you work at the Myaamia Center at the University of Miami. How would you prefer to be identified in terms of identity and that nature?

GI: [00:00:56] Just to clarify, I work at the Myaamia Center at Miami University...So in terms of identification, I prefer to be identified as a citizen of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, or a Myaamia person. And then in terms of my job status as a teacher for my community, specifically as the Assistant Director of the Myaamia Center.

PL: [00:01:32] Alright, awesome. So can you talk a little bit about the work that you do, specifically we have here talking about the Lunar Calendar projects?

GI: [00:01:42] I don't work directly on the Lunar Calendar except to help editing for its production. But I am a user and a follower of the Myaamia Kiel Squawk on the Myaamia Lunar Calendar system. So it's a key way in which Myaamia people who live in diaspora, there's 7,000

of us, who live across what is today the United States and outside the boundaries of this country. It's a key way in which we all keep time together by following the progress of the moon each month. From its sprouting as a waxing crescent to its growth to a full moon and then as it begins to die away, we follow the moon as it moves across these months and it helps us stay aligned with each other. And because the Lunar Calendar system is innately ecological, it's connected to our places, then it helps us stay connected to the way in which the environment and the animals, the environment changes and the behavior of the animals change around us.

PL: [00:02:57] And so just a follow up to that, you mentioned the ecological connection there, how does that influence sort of thinking about the connections between the earth and the sky and the land and things of that nature?

GI: [00:03:13] Yeah, so for Myaamia people, those of us deeply engaged in cultural revitalization, Miamiage, our place as a people, isn't like a two-dimensional flat landscape. It's three-dimensional, it includes what's beneath the surface and it includes the sky around us. They're all connected. So whether it's the constellations that we look up and see in the night sky or the Milky Way that reminds us of our ancestors who came before, for us, our place is all around us, up, down and all around. And the Lunar Calendar system is a way in which we've organized ourselves to follow the progress of time, month time and seasonal time within our place. And so when you think about, let's say, maple sugaring in the spring, connected to one or two lunar months, Makhun Zakir Swa, the little black bear moon, and Andekwakir Swa, the crow moon, our behavior of going into the woods and tapping trees and harvesting maple sap to then produce maple syrup and maple sugar is interlocked with the following of the behavior of the animals around us or in the case of black bear, the animals that used to be around us in larger numbers than they are today. And so the Lunar Calendar, as we follow its progress, we're reminded to think about the changes in a place around us, behavior of the animals around us, the changes in the plants. But that's communicated by looking up at the sky and looking at the relative position of constellations, depending on the time, the hour of the night it is, and then, of course, the growth and death of the moon each month. So that the sky has an integral role in helping us follow the progress of that ecological time.

PL: [00:05:19] Awesome. So, as sort of a member of this community and sort of a specialist in the Myaamia history, would you be able to speak about the knowledge of the sky and eclipses and how that's been transmitted over time?

GI: [00:05:38] Sure. So I have to preface this by saying that Myaamia story of our language and culture is one, for the past 200 years, one of really large losses. So in 1846, we were forcibly removed from our historic homelands. In the late 1800s, early 20th century, our lands in Oklahoma were allotted, and then eventually a lot of our reservation, we lost direct control over it for many years. And it's only since the 1990s that we were able to recover and rebuild our economy and to use that economic stability to fund the efforts to rebuild and reclaim and revitalize our language and culture. So in that process, there's a lot that's lost. So a lot of the stories that would have been passed down orally generation to generation, not all of them, but a lot of them weren't passed down. And so in our community, there aren't a lot of direct oral traditions that I'm aware of about eclipses of the sun or the moon. We do have citations in the

historical record and linguistic record that describe how people perceived eclipses of the sun and moon, and they connect very nicely. They align with how we follow the progress of the moon in a particular year. So, for example, we talk about the moon as a living thing. One of the metaphors is a plant. And so when the moon becomes a waxing crescent, which is what we say the month begins, we call that sakilwa kilswa, and we say like the moon is sprouting. And then when it's a waning crescent, when the moon is dying away, peh-meh-ne-ta kilswa, we say me-a-liss-a-wa kilswa, the moon is thin and gone to dying away. And so there's this understanding of the moon as being sort of born and growing, growing to full and then dying away and having a lifespan and then getting very sick and dying. And yet the knowledge, of course, that the next moon will sprout again. And our ancestors didn't believe it was like literally a new moon, but that this is a metaphoric way to talk about the progress of the moon. And when you look at the documentary record around eclipses, the same language is applied. So the moon is talked about in a total eclipse as being dead. And a sun in a total eclipse is talked about as being dead. And when it's a partial eclipse, it's being talked about as like half dead, or I think half green is sometimes used because green is a metaphor, like a plant, if a plant is half green and half brown, it's half alive. Of course, with the understanding that the sun isn't actually dead, it's metaphorically kind of dying and it's going to be good to be reborn. And we see in the older records, examples of people would shoot arrows at the sky or shoot their, in the trade era, the fur trade era, shoot their guns into the sky to make noise. And there was sort of this cultural behavior around creating noise as the sun is going to be reborn or the moon is going to be reborn. And it's really interesting parallel with the way in which children were welcomed into the world. So we have really interesting descriptions of the birthing process of a, you know, a woman being with her female relatives inside a wickiami, inside a home giving birth. And sometimes the men outside would kind of rush the lodge and make a lot of noise and shake the lodge. [SMALL INTERRUPTION, LOSS OF POWER, SPEAKER CONTINUES] So you see a parallel with the treatment of the sun and moon when they're at eclipse with the way men in a Miami village would respond to a new baby being born into the world. So you can imagine a woman giving birth in a lodge in a wickiami with her close female relatives there, no men present. And sometimes, and the sources say sometimes when the birth is particularly difficult, the men would gather outside the lodge and kind of raise a tumble, loud cries and run towards the lodge and shake it. And I imagine maybe sometimes shoot guns off, you know, whatever it took to make sort of a loud noise, and that there's some kind of belief and practice that you see paralleled in both of these cases of this large noise being a part of welcoming new life into the world. And, and so there's interesting parallel there between the birth of humans and the rebirth of the sun or the moon when they are passing out of the eclipse.

PL: [00:10:13] Awesome. Would you happen to have any personal experience with eclipses or eclipse sort of astronomical phenomena in that sort of way?

GI: [00:10:23] In that particular way, no, I've never shot a gun or a bow at the sky during an eclipse. I have watched a total eclipse before. So I have experienced a couple of eclipses. And we do have plans in the works, hopefully, to do an event here with our students. We have over 40

Myaamia students here at Miami University. We hope to be able to do a cultural event around the total eclipse coming this spring.

PL: [00:10:52] Would you be able to speak to any of like what you kind of hope to do or hope to talk about with that?

GI: [00:10:58] I think the main thing since we don't have, as I said, we don't have extant oral tradition around the eclipse or community behaviors around the eclipse in our community, is to really help our students understand that, you know, our ancestors were, you know, in many ways, highly developed scientists about how they observed the sky. And, you know, when you go back and read the historical record, there's some unfortunate stuff in there, you know, basically Europeans saying these folks are savages. They see the eclipse as an ill omen, the end of the world, the end of their people, you know, all this sort of over dramatic interpretation of community behavior. And eclipses happened all the time. Our ancestors followed the moon very, very closely and we have lots of sources about that. And they, we don't have the sources for the eclipse, but the eclipse has happened all the time. They happened regularly and so our ancestors, in the way they were in terms of our own cultural science, we know they observed and followed these things and had stories about them. For us as a people engaged in revitalization, some of what we have to do is create those stories anew because we don't have the old stories.

But we want to begin with this place of recognizing, you know, we were having this dramatic experience of observing a total eclipse, that this is something our ancestors watched many, many, many times. And they developed really complex systems for following the progress of the moon over generations. So we know they had complex systems for thinking and talking about this too. And we don't know what they were, but we want to honor their complexity here in this moment where we're watching this amazing celestial event together. That's at least the plan that exists in my mind. We still have a full blown on the calendar. Everyone's coming together thing yet, so we'll see how it actually comes together in the spring.

PL: [00:12:49] Well, that'll be very interesting. And I suppose, final question. So in our podcast series that we're doing about the nature of eclipses and such like that, is there a particular way that you'd like to hear sort of an indigenous American perspective being told in sort of a more broader sense?

GI: [00:13:15] That's a really good question, Peter and I'm careful not to speak for other indigenous people. It's very, very hard to generalize and so I guess my recommendations are that that there is no indigenous broad perspective that comes through the podcast but rather recognition that there are many, many different unique indigenous perspectives that are specific to tribal communities. And that there's a lot of respect paid to that diversity. Certainly there's going to be similarities, there's going to be overlap, but there isn't one perspective. You know, it's not my place to talk about other people's perspectives, but I've heard other tribal relatives talk about what their nations believe and do during eclipses, and it's radically different from my community and I think that's really great. And whatever happens I hope that that diversity is reflected in the stories you're able to share.

PL: [00:14:06] Awesome. Thank you.

[Note: Some tangential discussion from the audio file has been omitted]

[END OF INTERVIEW]