**Eclipse Activities for Kids: Folktales**

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**Folktales on Kepler 452 b**

Exo-folklorists of the 24th century have been busy cataloging folktales of the inhabitants of the Earth-like planet Kepler 452 b. This exo-planet orbits the distant, sun-like star Kepler 452 some 1800 light years from Earth in the direction of the constellation Cygnus. The planet is 63% bigger than Earth’s diameter and has a mass roughly five times the mass of the Earth. Nonetheless, the climate on Kepler 452 b is considerably cooler than Earth, with an average temperature of about 10 F. [[1]](#footnote-1) The equatorial zones have comfortable climates, however, and are covered with vast arboreal forests, volcanoes, and wide plains.

Artist's concept of the surface of the newfound exoplanet Kepler-452b, which is about 60 percent wider and five times more massive than Earth. This illustration imagines that a runaway greenhouse effect has begun to take hold on Kepler-452b, driving off much of the planet's surface water. (Image credit: SETI Institute/Danielle Futselaar)

The planet is spanned by five major, equatorial continents, separated by deep oceans. Northern and southern latitudes are covered with deep polar icecaps. Astronomers have named the continents after constellations, calling them Apus, Corvus, Lynx, Lacerta, and Lynx, which are rough English translations of the inhabitants’ own names.

A large moon known as BeBe orbits Kepler 452 b and produces frequent total eclipses across the planet. Inhabitants of Kepler 452 b’s five equatorial continents created stories to explain why the eclipses occur. Our exo-folklorists have collected many of these folktales and have shared them with us below.

People who study folklore classify folktales according to motif – identifying common elements and themes that show up in different cultures, places, and times. Our task today is to categorize these exo-folktales according to motif. Each table will receive a dozen (or so) folktales. Can you find a set of motifs that can be used to categorize the eclipse folktales of Kepler 452 b?

**Create an Eclipse Story**

Following their evaluation of folktales from Kepler 452 b, kids may be interested in creating their own story to explain the reason for eclipses of the Sun and Moon, using one of the motifs they find from the folktales below, or a new motif of their own imagination. Tales can be just a few sentences describing the basic idea, or longer, giving rich story details.

**Guidance to Instructors:**

We usually break students into small groups and give each group a set of 12 or so story vignettes. After a few minutes, students can share what motifs each group has identified and the common elements they see in the exo-folktales.

As a learning activity, it serves two goals.  1) a peek at the methodology of folklore, in identifying common elements and themes, and 2) an opportunity at creative writing related to the eclipse.

**Story Vignettes**

In central Lacerta, legend has it that a giant alligator-like creature with sharp claws and a long tail grabs the Sun to hide it in a deep, underwater cave in the middle of a swamp. Its master, the Lord of the Swamp, then convinces the alligator to release the Sun, which leaps back into the sky.

In western Pavo, the Goddess of the Sun, Morani, is said to retreat into a cave to hide from the fearsome Arakun, God of the Moon, when he comes too close. Morani can only be lured out once Arakun wanders off again in search of other prey.

In the mythology of eastern Corvus, the god of darkness, Abysseus, in the form of a giant crow, swallows the Sun. Corvan villagers try to make Abysseus release the Sun by tempting him with a bushel of corn.

Denizens of far northern Lynx explain that Afanasi, a giant snow cat, comes to devour the Sun. To prevent the Sun’s death, Afanasi must be frightened away by the screams of children and the cries of a waddle of flightless arctic birds.

Inhabitants on the eastern coast of Apus believe that solar eclipses and earthquakes are associated with a vengeful, fire breathing phoenix named Maleo that lives in a volcano. A solar eclipse means that the bird is angry about the peoples’ recent activities could pay them a visit to scorch their crops and feast on their livestock as punishment. The eclipse is a warning to clean up their act.

The residents of the plains of central Corvus refer to an eclipse as sickness of the Sun, which is wasting away. The deity Psittacos is angry about actions of the people and his anger is causing the Sun to fall ill. The people must atone for their bad actions so the Sun can recover from sickness.

According to the legends of the arboreal residents of the forests of central Lacerta, an eclipse results when a mischievous flying reptile with a long bushy tail flies up to the Sun and wraps his tail around it.

The peoples of the mountains of central Apus tell the story of a young male named Yezuli who was burned by the Sun while trekking high in the mountains. Yelezlu attached a heavy sack to a long pole to cover the Sun in revenge, A brightly colored bird flies up to loosen the sack to let the Sun escape back into the sky.

The name for a solar eclipse on an island off the southeast coast of Pavo is “Sun got caught in a spider web.” The spider was spinning a web along the Milky Way when it met up with the Sun. The Sun got tangled in the web, which dimmed its light. The spider helped the Sun get untangled, revealing again its full light. Later, the Moon also got caught in the web, causing a lunar eclipse. This story may have been their way of explaining why a solar eclipse happens around two weeks before or after a lunar eclipse.

The traditional belief villagers on the northwestern coast of Lynx holds giant bat swallows the Sun so that the sky remains dark and the bats can sleep. The Lynxian villagers build a warm, smoky fire to make the bat cough up the Sun to warm the chilly land.

In the rainforests along southern coast of Apus, it was commonly held that a giant seabird attacked and devoured the Sun. To frighten away the bird and save the Sun, Apuans bang drums and make loud noises. In fact, the Apuan word for an eclipse means to eat.

In Corvus mythology, two wicked crows, a brother and sister, chase the Moon and the Sun constantly across the sky to eat them. If they ever catch their prey, Corvus will be plunged into eternal darkness. Fortunately the inhabitants shout and bang sticks together to warn the Sun and Moon in time so they can evade the nasty crows.

In the oral traditions of southeast Lacorta, the Sun, a female, falls in love with the Moon and chases her across the sky. The Sun tells the spirits that hold up the sky that if they let Moon escape, she will plunge the world into darkness (a total solar eclipse). The priestess recites magical chants let Moon escape and bring back Sun’s light.

In the mythology of southern Lynx, the hot female Sun and cold male moon are married. The Sun rules the day, and the sleepy moon rules the night. Seeking companionship, the moon is drawn to his bride and they come together briefly to enjoy a brief, romantic interlude in darkness.

In a Pavoan myth, the Sun and moon are lovebirds who join up—the eclipse—but get lost in the moment and create stars to light their return to normalcy.

A folktale from western Apus identifies the Moon and Sun as quarreling brother and sister. After a particularly heated argument, Sun storms off while Moon chases after her. Because Moon is so intent on catching his sister (whether it is to apologize or continue the argument is unclear), he forgets to even take time to eat and becomes thinner and thinner until he must drop down to Earth to eat and regain his strength before continuing his pursuit. When Moon finally catches up to his sister, an eclipse occurs, until they quarrel again and Sun runs once more.

A legend on Corvus indicates that eclipses are a sign the gods are angry with what’s happening on the planet, and that the Sun would abandon Earth, bringing untold misery. The word “eclipse” actually comes from the Corvan word meaning “abandonment.”

Villagers in western Lacorta worshiped an all-powerful Sun god, who was generally believed to be benevolent. From time to time, however, he becomes angry when the people become greedy and take too much from the forest. Solar eclipses were understood to be a sign of his wrath and displeasure and the villagers would leave more of the forest’s goodies for the animals.

In the folklore of the dry, high plains of central Lynx, an eclipse occurs when the angry Sun turns away and covers herself with darkness in response to the population’s bad behavior, creating a poisonous dew. Villagers would stay indoors and seal their doors and windows until the dew dissipated.

According the traditions of southern Pavo, an eclipse means the Sun is sick and too weak to light the planet. Pavoans would light fires on hillsides to warm the land for the brief period when the Sun could not.

According to the legends of chilly northern Apus, an eclipse is caused by fighting between the Sun and Moon. When an eclipse occurs, the villagers in northern Apus come together as a community and try to end their own fighting as a way of encouraging the Sun and Moon to do the same.

Communities of western Corvus figured that the Sun was just a little clumsy and occasionally dropped its torch.

According to the mythology of islanders off the eastern coast of Lacorta, the lizard deity Tyranno is beheaded by the gods for munching on their tasty golden herd animals. Unfortunately, Tyranno’s head flies off into the sky and swallows the Sun, causing an eclipse. Fortunately, it was just his head, so the Sun quickly reappears.

In eastern Lynxian mythology, there are several different realms in addition to our own. One of these realms is completely dark, with no light at all. To remedy this, its shaman sends gigantic fierce cats to the world to hunt the Sun and Moon and steal them away. But every time the cats bite the Sun, they burn their mouths and run away.

Tribes in the forests of central Pavo believed that a solar eclipse signaled an angry Sun who had left the skies to go to his house in a volcano along the west coast. They try to appease the Sun with offerings of tasty fruit.

In Corvus, Vulture, the god of chaos and death, opposed the Sun god, and was always trying to reach the Sun to peck out its light — but in the end, the Sun was always able to fight him off, and rekindle its light.

For tribes of western Apus an eclipse meant that the Sun and Moon were having more children: the stars and planets that became apparent in the darkness of an eclipse but weren’t otherwise visible.

Villagers in northern Lacorta also thought of the moon as brother and sister who fought constantly and violently. For these villagers, an eclipse meant one of them had knocked the other one out so its light dimmed. Fortunately the light returned once the Sun or Moon regained consciousness.

For Pavoans along the continent’s eastern coast, an eclipse of the Sun was considered to be prank by small, yellow songbirds. The birds’ fairy-like spirits could be somewhat unpredictable, being anywhere from cheerful to mischievous or even evil in intent. When an eclipse transpired, it was believed to be a songbird covering, blotting out, or darkening the Sun for fun.

In Lynxian mythology, solar eclipses are caused by a Demon Cat. As the story goes, the Cat stole a potion giving him immortality. Moon saw him take it, and beheaded Demon Cat, but not before Demon Cat managed to swallow enough of the potion to render his head immortal. Demon Cat now roams the sky trying to eat the Sun and Moon. When he catches them, he eats them but because he’s just a severed head, the Sun (or Moon) falls out the back of his throat moments later.

1. Everything from this point on is fictional! [↑](#footnote-ref-1)