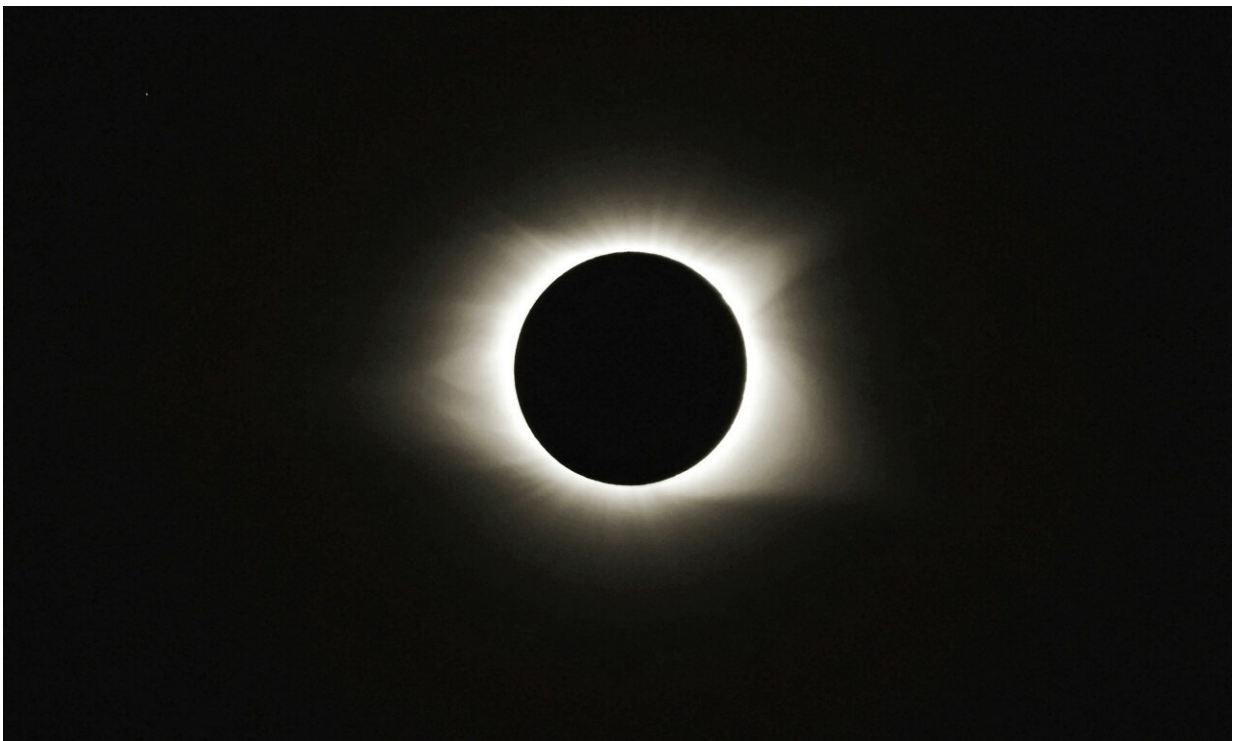


During a solar eclipse, some Indigenous groups believe it's not just your eyes that need protecting

April 8 2024, by Valerie Russ, The Philadelphia Inquirer



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The last time a total solar eclipse cast its shadows across the United States in August 2017, Jenée Chizick-Agüero, the founder and publisher of Motivos magazine, was pregnant with her son.

There was a viewing party in the parking lot outside Esperanza, a nonprofit on North 5th Street, and Chizick-Agüero was determined to go. In a [total solar eclipse](#), the moon aligns up between the earth and the sun, temporarily blocking the sun's light and turning day into nearly night, in some places.

But first, the Fishtown resident had to negotiate with some strong cultural beliefs of her husband, Jorge Arturo Agüero, and his family, who are Costa Rican.

Both Jorge Agüero and his mother, Nereida Esquivel, who still lives in Costa Rica, were worried about Chizick-Agüero catching a glimpse of the eclipse while pregnant.

"His mom covered herself in black clothing during the 1991 eclipse, when [she] was pregnant with his younger sister," she said.

Her mother-in-law told her she had worn all black to guard against her baby being born with a birthmark.

By the 2017 eclipse, Chizick-Agüero, who loved science, was all set to go out to watch it. Her own child would be born one month later. "But my husband said, 'No, you can't do this. It might jeopardize our son,'" Chizick-Agüero recalled.

That's when Chizick-Agüero learned that people in Costa Rica, especially the areas where Indigenous beliefs are strong, have customs about what [pregnant women](#) should do during a solar eclipse.

The 2017 eclipse was the first to be seen in a broad sweep across the country, from the Pacific to the Atlantic, in nearly a century, since June 1918. There had been an eclipse in February 1979, but that one was only visible in the Pacific Northwest of the U.S. through Canada.

So this was a major eclipse. Chizick-Agüero, born in the United States, had not grown up with myths about solar eclipses. She was adamant about watching it.

Her compromise was to attend the viewing party with a friend. In addition to wearing protective eye wear, Chizick-Agüero tied a black sweatshirt around her belly to honor her husband's beliefs. Their son was born a month later, without any birthmarks.

Remembering Maya eclipse myths

Diliana Cho Solis, a bilingual counseling assistant for the Philadelphia School District, lives in South Philly.

But she was born in Honduras, the daughter of a Chinese father and a Nicaraguan mother. Cho Solis said the eclipse myths in Honduras stem from Mayan legends. One belief is that crops will go bad because the moon "has taken the energy away from the sun."

There's also a belief that pregnant women should wear a red ribbon or anything red. "And if a child is born [during] an eclipse, people believe the child will be born with superpowers and be gifted," she said.

There are also beliefs that the sun and moon are lovers who have been punished, so they can only meet one time over several years.

U.S. Indigenous customs

There has been so much excitement about recent eclipses with crowds gathering to view them together that the Smithsonian Magazine and the New York Times published articles noting that for Indigenous peoples throughout the world, a solar eclipse can be spiritual and sacred.

During an [annular eclipse](#) in October 2023, the Navajo Nation closed all its parks during the eclipse to accommodate traditional beliefs.

"Navajo look at the universe as holistic," David Begay, a cultural astronomer and vice president of the Indigenous Education Institute, told the Times. The alignment of the planet, moon and sun during eclipses is understood as one cycle within an interconnected cosmic order."

And the Institute for Diné Culture, Philosophy and Government, in Arizona, on the Navajo Nation, told the Smithsonian Magazine in 2017:

"During the eclipse, we must be in full prayer and reverence. Prayers must be focused on the concept of the sun or moon going through an ending, and we are to pray about the ending of bad or evil, or the ending of phases of life. In addition, our prayers must be focused on the birth and renewal that will arrive when the eclipse ends."

Diné is what the Navajo people call themselves.

The Smithsonian listed a detailed description of various Indigenous beliefs about eclipses:

During a solar or lunar eclipse, "it is believed that a death occurs. A death is a very sacred occurrence. There are certain necessary protocols, but most important is the strict and comprehensive reverence in observing the occurrence of death," the Diné Institute said.

The Diné also believe the sun is male and the moon is female and that during an eclipse, the sun and moon are mating.

Once the eclipse has passed and the sun and moon are bright once again, the Diné believe "that a birthing has just taken place. It is believed that the mating is to give birth to, or renew, the universe and all creation."

The Taos Pueblo of New Mexico believe that people should stay indoors and keep babies away from windows.

The Cherokee in Oklahoma say the eclipse means "a giant frog in the sky is trying to eat the sun. Everybody is supposed to go outside and make a big noise with drums, whistles, and voices to scare the frog away."

A rare astronomical event

For Derrick Pitts, an astronomer at the Franklin Institute, many people growing up in the United States did not learn about solar eclipses because the widespread teaching of science didn't occur until after the Industrial Revolution.

Pitts said for many civilizations, the natural phenomenon of the moon blocking the sun caused fears that "something was interrupting the sun, and either we try to do something to reverse that, or we wait fearfully indoors until it's over and pray for protection from what evil or bad spirits might be affecting the sun."

"This is a rare astronomical event, and it's always great to connect people with real science," he said. Pitts will be hosting the Franklin Institute's viewing party from 1:30 to 5 p.m. on Monday. "I've seen eclipses before, and it's like a very deep dusk. It's not like night," he said.

Astrological interpretations

Stephanie Renée, who describes herself as the "Vibe Mistress," of Soul Sanctuary, a nonprofit arts education foundation, is Black and Caribbean and lives in Roxborough.

She didn't know of any customs surrounding solar eclipses while growing up in Washington, D.C., but as someone who studies astrology, Renée said astronomical events like eclipses, in general, represent "a new beginning, and a radical change."

"It's about a radical moving forward in your own individual energy," she said. "What makes this solar eclipse significant is that it is happening while Mercury is in retrograde. This happens about three times a year, when there is an approximately three-week period where you need to double- and triple-check what you say, think and do. "

For instance, she said during a Mercury retrograde, people should be careful about making major purchases or signing contracts and there should be a high level of caution.

It's also significant that this eclipse is happening as the skies enter the astrological sign of Aries, Renée added.

"This means that you have all this Aries energy which is pushing you forward, an eclipse, that is about an inner shift, while at the same time the Mercury retrograde is telling you to slow down, double-check things and make sure your communications don't go haywire," she said.

Watch the animals

Addie Johnston, a research scientist who works at the University of Pennsylvania, lives in the Graduate Hospital area of the city and is chair of the Friends of Carpenter Green Park, at 17th and Carpenter.

Johnston is asking her neighbors and parents of students at the nearby Edwin M. Stanton school to encourage children to get involved in a science project watching out for odd behaviors from animals, birds and insects during the eclipse.

She has posted fliers about the Solar Eclipse Safari, which is asking people to go outdoors and observe animals.

"All animals are affected or controlled to some degree by their [circadian rhythms](#), and with the skies turning darker, there's a potential for bees to act a bit odd," Johnston said. "You may notice some alteration in the flying habits of the bees, or birds."

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