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## Elal Cycle

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## ELAL CYCLE

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As plains dwellers, the Tehuelche were hardy drifters who wandered across the barren steppe dressed in the skins of the guanaco, the pretty, rust-coloured relative of the llama that inhabits the southern reaches of the Americas.

The Tehuelche creation story is known as the Elal Cycle, after a heroic man-god who arrives in Patagonia from a “Big Island” on the back of a swan. He lands on the summit of Chalten Mountain (now known as Fitz Roy) and surveys Patagonia, resisting the ice and snow by rubbing stones together to make fire. From the magical island, Elal brings all the animals that will become his “faithful friends” in the new world. Elal wrestles with pumas, is swallowed by a whale, fights with his father (who tried to kill him in the womb,) resists the sexual advances of his grandmother (and turns her into a field mouse,) courts and marries a daughter of the sun, and prevails over all the other daily trials and tribulations that would have beset the average Tehuelche man.

Unsurprisingly, sky also dominates the Tehuelche universe. According to their cosmology, Kóoch, the “sky” or creator god, lived alone on the eastern fringes of the world. Weeping bitterly in his abject solitude, he made Arroch, the primordial sea. When he saw the waters were rising he sighed, and this wind parted the clouds, and a dim light shone on the waters. Eager to behold his handiwork, Kóoch made the Sun-man and Moon-woman, who made love behind the mountains and gave birth to a daughter, the evening star. The people of the moon, the evil ones, took the forms of a male guanaco, a rhea, and a rock-hurling mountain. In contrast, the stars are images of the souls of deceased Tehuelche, and the night sky is paradise.

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Chris Moss, *Patagonia: A Cultural History* (Oxford OX4 1LY, Signal Books Limited 2008), 32-35.



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