

Historicizing the Horse. The Case of Three Native American Myths

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Abstract: This article studies the process of historicizing the horse in Native American cultures by exploring its representation(s) in three Blackfoot myths - *Thunder's Gift of Horses*, *Water Spirit's Gift of Horses*, and *How Morning Star Made the First Horse*. The horse was a new historical reality for the Blackfoot; embedding it in myth was a method used to internalize it in the tribe's narrative. The analysis focuses on how historicity of the horse was conditioned by its mythicity.

Keywords: *horse, myth, Blackfoot, acculturation, historicization.*

Apart from contact with the white man, the acquisition of the horse constituted the element that fundamentally revolutionized the history and culture of the Plains Indians. Historians who dealt extensively with the topic, such as John C. Ewers or Thomas E. Mails, claimed that the lack of systematic recordings and documentation made it difficult to accurately state whether the Plains tribes first came into contact with the white man or with the horse. However, based on existing sources, it was concluded that by the time these tribes met the first white explorers, they had already acquired the horse and included it in their cultural repository. Moreover, due to its influence on hunting, warfare, the idea of property, travelling and camp movements, trade (within the tribe and tribe-to-tribe), religion or social life, the horse was not only culturally enframed (including here the name it was initially attributed, *elk-dog*), but was often attributed supernatural powers. If one takes into account the fact that the acquisition of the horse contributed to an unprecedented progress for most of the Plains tribes, then this transfer of the horse from the historical dimension to the mythological one seemed the logical thing to do, since tribal knowledge was encoded in mythical stories. In many ways, it was a process similar to that of the response to the arrival of the white man: “the historical acceptance of the white man's arrival was soon followed by a sustained collective effort to transform it into something culturally acceptable and, therefore, understandable. This meant a forceful submergence of history into myth.” [Șerban, 2014: 151] Therefore, in order to include the horse into the tribe's collective

knowledge, it was transformed into a creature endowed with supernatural powers and included in the creation myths, which, through their didactic function, told, retold and passed on the cultural framework of a tribe. This transformation of the horse into a cultural asset wrapped in myth represented a collective acknowledgement of its influence and role in the daily life of the tribe. As a myth-derived animal, the horse was credited with immense transformative powers and abilities that would reflect upon and impact history; as a sacred animal, it had the capacity to generate history, it was a direct source of history.

Starting from these premises, this article will focus on a comparative study of the mythical representation of the horse in some of the most representative myths belonging to Plains tribes, such as the three stories collected, titled and included by John C. Ewers in his extensive book *The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture* [Ewers, 1967: 291-297]. According to Ewers, during his field work on the Blackfoot Reservation in the 1940s, “elderly Piegan informants recited three different myths explaining the origin of horses.” [Ewers, 1967: 291] He gave titles to all three myths, as follows: *Thunder’s Gift of Horses*, *Water Spirit’s Gift of Horses*, and *How Morning Star Made the First Horse*. As these titles indicate, the origin of the horse was directly associated with or attributed to spirits from the sky or from the underwater, home to the tribe’s most powerful spirits and the source of their sacred knowledge, an aspect which indicates a direct connection and parallelism between cultural identity and the horse. “In this respect the horse origin myths follow the tribal pattern of imputing the origin of their most sacred possessions to one or another of these spirit sources. The Sun Dance and medicine pipe are represented in Blackfoot mythology as gifts of Sun and Thunder, two of the most feared and revered sky spirits. The beaver bundle and buffalo painted lodges are represented as gifts of the underwater people, also held in great awe by the Blackfoot.” [Ewers, 1967: 297] The representation of the horse as a gift from the spirits, as two of the stories imply, highlights the fact that the animal’s presence in the historical reality of the tribe was perceived and functioned as a manifestation of the spirits’ will and that it had been created with an intent to help the people. Similar to the cultural traditions of the tribe, the horse had a sacred origin and, as a result, constituted a fundamental pillar of their collective identity.

Like most Native American creation stories, these three begin with a temporal contextualization of the events to follow:

“Many years ago, when people used dogs for moving camp, there lived a Piegan named Wise Man.” - *Thunder’s Gift of Horses* [Ewers, 1967: 293]

“A long time ago there was a poor boy who tried to obtain secret power so that he might be able to get some of the things he wanted but did not have.” - *Water Spirit’s Gift of Horses* [Ewers, 1967: 294]

“Before the Piegan had horses they had dogs. Then everything was flint. There was no iron.” - *How Morning Star Made the First Horse* [Ewers, 1967: 297]

The abrupt beginning of these stories, a common characteristic for Native American myths of creation, places the time of action in an *illo tempore*, but subsequent to the world *in statu nascendi*. It is evident that the events to unfold happen after the creation of the world and of the first people, particularly in the case of the first and third stories, in which a historical element that is used as a preamble to the story itself – the use of dogs instead of horses. In fact, this historical element seems to justify why it was necessary for the events to happen. It triggers events and it is the context that actually makes the story possible. At the same time, it also indicates that these events happen at a time when there already existed a functional society which included, among other particularities, the use of dogs for transportation. So, if this implies that knowledge had already been imparted to the people, who stepped into history and were a functioning society, why was it necessary to refer to history as a pretext for returning to the time of creation? Is this an allusion to the fact that the act of creation had not been fulfilled? That something had been missing from the initial act of creation? If so, then it is directly implied that, prior to the appearance of the horse, creation itself had not been fulfilled. Thus, the horse appears to be the missing element of the initial act of creation. Moreover, the fact the spirits in the three stories give it as a gift or create it at a time that is clearly distinct from the time of genesis indicates a sort of tacit acknowledgment on their side that, without the horse, creation had not been completed. Even the beginning of the second story, which is not anchored in the same historical and cultural reality of the pre-horse era, suggests a similar perspective: it is implied that there was lack of knowledge, a body of knowledge that had not been imparted during the initial age of creation, but which is obviously needed. Without the horse, creation was not completed and adding it to that moment meant incorporating it in the sacred knowledge of the tribe. I consider that this return to the moment of creation for the purpose of adjusting or completing it also indicates a sense of collective awareness of the role of the horse in Blackfoot society (and in other horse cultures of the Plains). According to Thomas E. Mails, “the horse led, then, to a period of great prosperity, and to what might be called the golden age of the Plains Indians, which lasted from 1750 to 1875 – or perhaps to 1886, when virtually the last buffalo was killed by white hunters.” [Mails, 1996: 216]

The recognition and internalization of the role of the horse in forging progress and cultural innovation triggered the need to include it in the mythical dimension, as this would not have only justified its impact on the life of the tribe, but would have also given it a sense of predestination. Progress was meant to come because the horse had been created out of the spirits’ intention to help the tribe(s) improve their lives. Therefore, the main purpose of these myths was to explain the transfer of the horse from myth to history, from a latent component of culture to a potent one.

The plots of the three stories develop around initiatic journeys or experiences that the characters undertake in order to find the horse. There is no

previous knowledge of the horse, so the events proceed as quests for new knowledge and the appropriate methods to implement it in the community. The initiatic journey is conditioned by a departure from the community, which the characters leave behind as they venture into the unknown or the unfamiliar.

“Let’s move away from here and make camp in the woods. I’ll collect all the wood you need, but you must not break any of the sticks I bring in.” Wise man and his wife moved into the woods. – *Thunder’s Gift of Horses* [Ewers, 1967: 293]

He went out from his camp and slept alone on mountains, near great rocks, beside rivers. He wandered until he came to a large lake northeast of the Sweetgrass Hills. By the side of that lake he broke down and cried. – *Water Spirit’s Gift of Horses* [Ewers, 1967: 294]

The young man said, “Take hold of my back. Follow me, but keep your eyes shut.” She did as she was told. After a time the young man told her to open her eyes. When she did, she saw that the country was strange to her. – *How Morning Star Made the First Horse* [Ewers, 1967: 297]

This departure represents a symbolic crossing from the space of history into the space of myth. As it is the case with most Native American stories, the physical representation of the mythical space was not necessarily different from that of the historical one, since its sacredness, similar to the sacred language, was a convention. In his study dedicated to the sacred language in the case of the Lakota tribe, William K. Powers concluded that “the common people do not comprehend sacred language because their philosophical and religious canons decree that they are not supposed to comprehend it. Admitting incomprehensibility about sacred language is tantamount to declaring one’s allegiance to all that is historically and culturally Lakota.” [Powers, 1992: 30] A similar approach functions in the case of historical vs. mythical spatiality in these stories, as the protagonists do not manifest a sense of uncanniness once the action moves into the mythical realm.

Of all the three myths collected by Ewers, the first one, *Thunder’s Gift of Horses*, is the most complex and it describes the process of acquiring horses as part of a larger process of development of cultural knowledge. At the beginning of the story, Wise Man and his wife, referred to as a ‘handsome couple’, are dissatisfied with their clothes, described as ‘plain buckskin’. This sets off the series of events that follow in the story, events that prove to be an initiatic journey into cultural betterment, one that uncovers new pieces of knowledge, such as making a bonnet of eagle feathers, using weasel skins to adorn the costume or adding quills to the feathers, which are imparted to the members of the tribe, and culminates with the discovery of the horse. (A broader approach to this text could suggest that, as the plot develops, we actually witness the birth of a Blackfoot warrior: the coming of the horse, together with the other cultural elements embedded in the same process of creation – such as the feather bonnet and the quills, seem to construct the image of a warrior in full regalia.) Thus, the first contact with the horse appears to be the climax of the process of cultural development and it suggests the fulfilment of

creation. But the gift of horses is conditioned by a positive first contact, as Wise Man, who was at first afraid, is expected to not frighten the animals. In other words, the gift was conditioned by the proof of a bond between the protagonist of the story and the horses, whom Thunder, the gift giver, wants to make sure that they feel comfortable in the presence of the Blackfoot.

Thunder said, "My boy, you have been good. You didn't frighten my horses. They didn't hurt you. They are the animals I ride. Because you did not frighten my horses and they were not afraid of you I shall give you some of them." –

Thunder's Gift of Horses [Ewers, 1967: 294]

The successful first interaction between the horses and the Blackfoot could be considered an indication of the incipient phase of a new cultural dimension – that of the horse era of Blackfoot culture. It is relevant how the tribe's awareness of the special relationship they had with horses is transferred into the story, suggesting that, prior to the blooming of the horse culture period, there had been a pre-existing mutual knowledge, as horses and people manifest an innate sense of belonging together. In fact, all three stories contain this episode of a very rapid process of *accustomization* and *acculturation*. At first, the protagonists in all stories have a sense of fear in the presence of the horse, but that sentiment quickly vanishes and changes to mutual understanding and collaboration, implying that the meeting of the two, horse and man, was meant to happen.

This is particularly evident in the case of *Thunder's Gift of Horses*, where the horse had already been created, but was not yet given to the people, still roaming in the mythical realm (in the sky or underwater). They appear to be a sort of preconceived cultural element that waited to be transferred from myth into history; a cultural element that contained in itself the power to change the course of Blackfoot history, but these changes could only be triggered by a successful first interaction between horses and men. The story does not explain how the horse itself was created, but instead insists on the idea of an encounter that was bound to happen, of a pre-existing familiarity that would ensure a safe and successful transition of the 'strange animal' from the spirits' world to the Blackfoot world.

In the case of the second myth, *Water Spirit's Gift of Horses*, the origin of the horse starts from the assumption that horses could not exist as such in the underwater world, so it was expected that they would evolve from an animal physically associated with the water environment. Thus, the boy witnesses the birth of the horse, as it transforms out of a mallard duck, but not visually, because he only hears it. The boy leads the process of transformation, the coming into being of the horse, which develops based on instructions provided by the water spirit, but is forbidden to actually see it happen. Moreover, this process of shapeshifting happens during the night, adding to the mysterious nature of the endeavour and suggesting that the process itself should remain unknown, as in sacred, rather than being revealed. With the coming of dawn, creation is complete and it unveils the "strange animal"; again, this initial stage of strangeness is rapidly overcome by the

boy's prepossession of the necessary knowledge in order to transform the unfamiliar into familiar and master the animal.

At daybreak he turned around and saw a strange animal at the end of the line, a horse. He mounted it and, using the rawhide rope as a bridle, rode back to camp. Then he found that many horses had followed him.

The people of the camp were afraid of the strange animals. But the boy signed to them not to fear. He dismounted and tied a knot in the tail of his horse. Then he gave everybody horses from those that had followed him. –

Water Spirit's Gift of Horses [Ewers, 1967: 294]

At the beginning of the story, the boy leaves his village and embarks on a quest to “obtain secret power”; at his return from the journey (from the mythical realm), the boy appears as a bringer of knowledge, which he deliberately shares with the rest of the community. His gift of knowledge (embodied by the horse) is openly acknowledged by the tribe and given central status, as five of the old men in the village give their daughters to the boy in return for the horses – a gesture that suggests the historical and cultural role attributed to the horse by the Blackfoot. The ending part of the story focuses on the completion of the whole process: once the horse enters the Blackfoot universe, it emerges as a transformative element, as a forger of new historical and cultural possibilities. The horse is described as the cradle or originator of new directions and dimensions, which had been wrapped in it and are now activated through interaction with men. The final step of this cultural integration consists in naming the animal, and its identity is accomplished – the horse finally becomes what they knew it to be. The *historicization* of the horse is complete and it marks a turning point in the tribe's history:

Until that time the people had had only dogs. But the boy told them how to handle the strange horses. He showed them how to use them for packing, how to break them for riding and for travois, and he gave the horse its name, elk dog. –

Water Spirit's Gift of Horses [Ewers, 1967: 295]

The third Blackfoot myth recorded by Ewers, *How Morning Star Made the First Horse*, offers a different perspective upon the origin of the horse. Contrary to the first one, in which the horses had already been created and were in the possession of Thunder, or the second one, in which the appearance of the horse is the result of a process of shape shifting, this is the only myth which actually narrates and describes the actual act of creating the horse. The process of creation is triggered again by a member of the tribe, a woman in this case, who was unhappy with condition and falls in love with a bright morning star, which she meets next day in the form of a young man. As she follows him, they leave the historical realm and enter the mythical one where, after a while, the woman gives birth to a boy. During one day's play, the little boy is given a crooked tree to play with, described as having the shape of a little horse. As playing develops, creation proceeds – Morning Star and the woman, the boy's parents, keep adding new elements to the

tree: fur (like a deer), a tail, ears, hoofs, and then they add movement, sight and hearing. The act of creating the horse seems to be incidental rather than intentional, as it emerges out of a game. However, even though the creation of the horse looks somehow peripheral to the main plot of the story, it progressively moves from the margin to the centre until it becomes pivotal as the events draw near to the end:

Morning Star then told the boy, "From now on your people will have horses. You will no longer need to use dogs. In time you will have many horses. Your horses will never disappear. You need never walk any more." –

How Morning Star Made the First Horse [Ewers, 1967: 297]

A comparison of the endings of the three myths analyzed highlights the didactic dimension usually present in Native American stories of creation, as stated at the beginning of this analysis. They all account for the origin of one major component of their culture – the horse, in this case – and ‘teach’ the community how to implement it or make use of it historically speaking. At the same time, they are an indicator of the transformative structure and dynamism of Native American myths and showcase the traditional literature’s capacity to adapt to and adopt, in the sense of an internalization, new historical contexts, making them culturally familiar. As Karl Kroeber put it, “the stories had been shaped by their function as a means for uncontroversially examining against particular new conditions, psychological and social tensions and pressures that had led to the institution of specific social practices. These practices embodied deeply cherished beliefs and firmly established patterns of behavior because they had worked effectively.” [Kroeber, 2004: 3] The horse was a new historical condition for the Blackfoot and rooting it in myth was the only means available for internalizing it in the tribe’s narrative. The mythical embedding of the horse gave it historical legitimacy; thus, the role of such stories was to account for the historical presence of the horse in the life of the tribe.

To conclude, the three Blackfoot myths explain how the horse was historicized by being first mythicized. Therefore, it appears that the introduction of the horse was a double process: the actual acquisition (at the historical level), followed by a mythical embedment (at the level of the tribe’s collective mind, in order to psychologically internalize and integrate the new animal). The three Blackfoot myths show that a reversed chronology of these two processes was necessary in order to incorporate the horse in their narrative; mythical origins not only explained, but also justified the horse and imbued it with meaning(s). The historicity of the horse was possible through and conditioned by its mythicity.

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