

Historicizing the Horse (III). *The Orphan Boy and the Elk Dog (Blackfoot)*

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Abstract: The present study is the third in a series dedicated to analyzing the process of historicizing the horse in Native American cultures and it focuses on its representation in a Blackfoot story, *The Orphan Boy and the Elk Dog*, retold from several sources around 1910 and included in the anthology of Native American myths and legends published by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz. Although it is not a creation story, since it does not narrate how the first horse was created but explains how it was acquired by the tribe, *The Orphan Boy and the Elk Dog* follows a common pattern, very similar to the one present in the stories I analyzed in my previous studies on this topic: the historical legitimacy of the horse is constructed through a process of de- and re-historicization, which can only be achieved via mythicization.

Keywords: *horse, Blackfoot, myth, enculturation, mythicization, historicization.*

When the horse entered Native American culture(s), it widened the understanding, representation, and projection of both macro- and microhistory and of the limits and/or possibilities of both systems. The acquisition of horses changed the flow of history, increased its speed and led to the climax of these cultures' development, a period that lasted for approximately one century. I mentioned in my previous two articles published on this topic (*Meridian Critic* Volume 37 – 2021 and Volume 39 – 2022) that the horse meant innovation at an unprecedented scale and it enhanced progress in all aspects of tribal life. In his landmark book on the horse in Blackfoot culture, John C. Ewers wrote “that the horse, which literally lifted the Indian off his feet, broadened his concepts of area and distance, shortened his concepts of travel time, altered his opinions of the difficulties of moving camp and making a living, and that it quickened the tempo of his life and made that life more exciting, cannot be denied, even though we lack precise techniques for evaluating the psychological influences of the acquisition of and use of horses upon the Indians.” (Ewers 1967: 302)

If we understand historicity as the mere separation of fact from legend, then Ewers' focus on the factual aspects of the horse's role in Native American cultures leaves out its mythicity and the undeniable changes that the animal brought to the body of tribal knowledge – the stories. The newly gained speed of tribal history was replicated in the complex process of transforming and adapting old meanings to new contexts, in an attempt to make the horse preexist factuality. The *historical horse* connoted the *mythical horse*; the

process of historicization was contingent on a process of enculturation that could be achieved through a process of mythicization. The common denominator in this process were the stories, which offered the necessary ideological instruments in such a transformation, and my previous two articles (in which I analyzed three Blackfoot stories – *Thunder’s Gift of Horses*, *Water Spirit’s Gift of Horses*, *How Morning Star Made the First Horse*, and a Choctaw one – *The Tale of the Wind Horse*) analyzed the vivid preoccupation of horse culture tribes to create the narrative of the horse.

B. Capps stated that “a Plains Indian spent most of his life on a horse. As a child, when the camp was on the move, he shared his mother’s saddle. Later he rode to the hunt and into real battle. Much later he might look forward to spending his remaining years as the rich and venerable owner of a large herd.” (Capps 1973: 45) Before the life of the Native American identified with and was defined by the horse, the animal had to undergo an ideological repositioning, materialized in a transfer from historical representation to mythical representation; at the end of this transfer, the horse emerged as a myth-historical being. These stories drafted and explained the framework for a functional, often perfect relationship between the members of a tribe and the horse, so a didactic, formative dimension was always embedded in them. The purpose of ‘horse stories’ was not mere entertainment, although at the time of storytelling the narrative itself was entertaining, as they referred to and explained the formation of identity, both at the individual and the collective level. Today, they can be interpreted as paradigmatic narratives – they constructed and defined a standard for the social world of the tribes and, with each storytelling, relevant information related to the “the capacities, dispositions, intentions, actions, and reactions” (Boyd 2009: 130) of the members of the tribe was retransmitted so as to guide them in engaging the present and engaging the future. The world of the ‘horse Native American’ was made possible, constructed and consolidated through stories, which alludes to the theory advanced by Paul Ricoeur in an interview conducted by Richard Kearney, that of myth as the bearer of possible worlds. (I explained the functionality of this concept in the case of Native American horse myths in my previous article on the topic, *Historicizing the Horse (II). The Tale of the Wind Horse (Choctaw)*).

The first story that will be analyzed in this article is *The Orphan Boy and the Elk Dog*, told by the Blackfoot and included in the anthology of *American Indian Myths and Legends* edited by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz (1984: 53-60). The beginning of the story conceptually anchors the events at a time when the tribe had not acquired the horse and only used dogs for transport and also introduces the main character: an orphan boy, who also deaf, who is depicted as an outcast, not accepted by his own tribe and perceived as a representation of *otherness*. There is also a contrast between the boy’s physical appearance and the name he was given at birth, Long Arrow, and it is around this discrepancy that the plot develops – his name will prove bound to a destiny that the boy is meant to fulfill.

In the days when people had only dogs to carry their bundles, two orphan children, a boy and his sister, were having a hard time. The boy was deaf, and because he

could not understand what people said, they thought him foolish and dull-witted. Even his relatives wanted nothing to do with him. The name he had been given at birth, while his parents still lived, was Long Arrow. Now he was like a beaten, mangy dog, the kind who hungrily roams outside a camp, circling it from afar, smelling the good meat boiling in the kettles but never coming close for fear of being kicked. (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984: 53)

The only person that cared for him and looked after him was his sister, but she is adopted by a family who rejected the boy (“they certainly did not want the awkward, stupid boy”) and, when it is time for the tribe to move (using dog travois) the boy is left behind:

Eventually the game was hunted out near the camp that the boy regarded as his, and the people decided to move. The lodges were taken down, belongings were packed into rawhide bags and put on dog travois, and the village departed. “Stay here,” they told the boy. “We don’t want your kind coming with us.” (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984: 53)

This is the action that opens the series of events in the story, which will follow the boy’s transformation from a marginal character to a central one; in Hegelian terms, as the story unfolds, in his quest for acceptance and belonging (a search for identity) the boy moves from the margin of the system to the center: from an outcast rotating outside the system, he becomes the center around which the system rotates. At first, he only wants to rejoin his tribe – “whether they liked it or not” – but in his attempt to do so magical things begin to happen and the time of the story swiftly switches from the historical to the mythical.

As he was stumbling, running, panting, something suddenly snapped in his left ear with a sound like a small crack, and a worm-like substance came out of that ear. All at once on his left side he could hear birdsongs for the first time. He took this worm-like thing in his left hand and hurried on. Then there was a snap in his right ear and a worm-like thing came out of it, and on his right side he could hear the rushing waters of a stream. His hearing was restored! (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984: 54)

The restoration of his hearing coincides with the first moment of happiness in the boy’s life (“The orphan boy laughed and was happy for the first time in his life.”) and this alludes to the idea that contact with myth reshapes not only his physical abilities, but also his behavior: he gains more courage and sets off on the journey to become the embodiment of his own name, a journey that begins with his encounter with Good Running, described as a “kindly old chief”, who suddenly acknowledges that “it was wrong to abandon him” and decides to give him something to eat. At this point, one of the distinct functions of stories in Native American cultures, that of storing, developing and passing on strategic socio-cultural knowledge is highlighted when the old chief feeds the boy different parts of a fat buffalo cow:

“Rest here, grandson, you’re sweaty and covered with dust. Here, have some tripe.”

The boy wolfed down the meat. He was not used to hearing and talking yet, but his eyes were alert and Good Running also noticed a change in his manner. “This boy,” the chief said to himself, “is neither stupid nor crazy.” He gave the orphan a piece of the hump meat, then a piece of liver, then a piece of raw kidney, and at last the very best kind of meat—a slice of tongue. (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984: 54)

Thus, Good Running decides to adopt the boy and help him meet the expectations encoded in his name, Long Arrow, who soon begins to be part of the community's collective identity – “he learns to speak and to understand well” and this means that he no longer sits on the margin of the system, but is now part of it. The result of his intersection with mythical time, manifested through the supernatural experiences that restored his hearing, and of the old chief's acknowledgement of his transformation is that the boy becomes “a fine young hunter, tall and good-looking in the quilled buckskin outfit that the chief's wife made for him.”

Though a member of the community at this point, he is not an accepted one, as the others' perception of him is still connected to his past as an outcast. The next leg of his journey, the one into public acceptance, will be the one that will ease his transfer from margin to center, in Hegelian terms. In search for recognition and social acceptance and legitimation, the boy is told about the existence of an unknown animal, living at the bottom of a far-flung lake, information that is imparted to him by old chief.

(...) But on winter nights, men talk of powerful spirit people living at the bottom of a faraway lake. Down in that lake the spirit people keep mystery animals who do their work for them. These animals are larger than a great elk, but they carry the burdens of the spirit people like dogs. So they're called Pono-Kamita-Elk Dogs. They are said to be swift, strong, gentle, and beautiful beyond imagination. Every fourth generation, one of our young warriors has gone to find these spirit folk and bring back an Elk Dog for us. But none of our brave young men has ever returned. (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984: 55)

Through Good Running, we learn that the tribe was cognizant of the horse's existence in its mythical form, among the spirit people, but all attempts made at transferring the animal into history failed to succeed. These horses appear to be archetypal representations, the intrinsic model, inherently possessing the qualities for which they would be treasured by the Blackfoot, but also the qualities that would ultimately transform them into the innovative force behind the historical progress of the tribe(s) – “swift, strong, gentle, and beautiful beyond imagination.” Thus, it is indirectly implied that the task of *historicizing the horse*, extracting it from the spirit world and inserting it in the real world, can only be fulfilled by someone who represents a standard, a model of behavior; someone who would define the quintessence of what it means to be a Blackfoot. The formative, didactic function of the story surfaces again as the storyteller reiterates what qualities are needed in order to develop and maintain a positive relationship with the horse:

Grandson, first learn to be a man. Learn the right prayers and ceremonies. Be brave. Be generous and open-handed. Pity the old and the fatherless, and let the holy men of the tribe find a medicine for you which will protect you on your dangerous journey. We will begin by purifying you in the sweat bath. (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984: 55)

A closer look at these qualities reveal the fact that they directly refer to situations similar to his own; in other words, the members of the tribe had failed

to act on the common and defining principles of a Blackfoot society when the rejected him as an outcast and decided to leave him behind. Since these qualities are a prerequisite to acquiring horses, it can be inferred that all previous attempts failed because of several flaws of character on the side of the Blackfoot. Therefore, the boy is advised to master the qualities whose absence had marked his destiny prior to embarking on the journey. At this point in the story, the dimension and the purpose of the journey change as it moves from the level of *microhistory* to that of *macrohistory* – what started as a personal quest for recognition and social acceptance now moves to a grander scale, with implications for the whole tribe, over a long period of time. As Long Arrow begins his quest for the horses, the initiatic journey for the accomplishment of the boy's inner self becomes an initiatic journey for the accomplishment of the collective self.

The journey takes the boy through several supernatural encounters until he finally “came to the biggest lake he had ever seen, surrounded by towering snow-capped peaks and waterfalls of ice.” Accompanied by his dog, he arrives at the destination exhausted and falls asleep. When he wakes up the next day, he is greeted by a beautiful child, dressed in a buckskin robe adorned with porcupine quills, a particularity of the Blackfoot culture. His arrival was expected:

The boy said: “We have been expecting you for a long time. My grandfather invites you to his lodge. Follow me.” (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984: 57)

The boy soon discovers that courage is needed to dive into the waters of the lake and enter the spirit world, a quality that, he is later explained, was not possessed by the other young men from his village who embarked on previous journeys to bring horses to the people. This could infer the idea that courage was perceived as the founding quality of the relationship between the people and the horses.

Some came before you from time to time, but they were always afraid of the deep water, and so they went away with empty hands. But you, grandson, were brave enough to plunge in, and therefore you are chosen to receive a wonderful gift to carry back to your people. Now, go outside with my grandson. (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984: 58)

In fact, the courage to dive into the waters of the lake stands for the courage to leave behind the physical world – the space of history – and venture into the spirit world – the space of myth. Thus, Long Arrow's spatial movement builds a bridge between history and myth, a connection that was necessary for the horses to cross from one realm to the other. An incursion into myth grants the horses passage into history.

While in the spirit world, the realm of myth, the boy does not experience a sense of unheimlich, of unfamiliarity, and he does not feel an outcast; on the contrary, the environment mirrors that of his village and the tipi in which the old man lives seems to be a prototypal image of the ones back home.

Long Arrow descended this slope until he came to a small, flat valley. In the middle of it stood a large tipi of tanned buffalo hide. The images of two strange animals

were drawn on it in sacred vermilion paint. (...) Yet he still looked around to admire the furnishings of the tipi, the painted inner curtain, the many medicine shields, wonderfully wrought weapons, shirts and robes decorated with porcupine quills in rainbow colors, beautifully painted rawhide containers filled with wonderful things, and much else that dazzled him. (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984: 57-58)

In this familiar context, Long Arrow finally meets the only unfamiliar element: the horse. The way he perceives and describes them matches Good Running's description earlier in the story.

The beautiful boy took Long Arrow to a meadow on which some strange animals, unlike any the young man had ever seen, were galloping and gamboling, neighing and nickering. They were truly wonderful to look at, with their glossy coats fine as a maiden's hair, their long manes and tails streaming in the wind. Now rearing, now nuzzling, they looked at Long Arrow with gentle eyes which belied their fiery appearance.

"At last," thought Long Arrow, "here they are before my own eyes, the Pono-Kamita, the Elk Dogs!" (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984: 58)

Next, the process of enculturating Long Arrow to the world of the horse begins and it represents the penultimate step in the historicization of the horse. As the story narrates and he is instructed on how to approach and deal with the horse, the tribe is reminded of the main guidelines for this interaction. Thus, the narrative reveals and establishes a framework for the integration and adequate use of the horse in Blackfoot society.

"Watch me," said the mystery boy, "so that you learn to do what I am doing." Gracefully and without effort, the boy swung himself onto the back of a jet-black Elk Dog with a high, arched neck. Larger than any elk Long Arrow had ever come across, the animal carried the boy all over the meadow swiftly as the wind. Then the boy returned, jumped off his mount, and said, "Now you try it." (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984: 58)

When Long Arrow tries and understands that he can successfully master the horse, he experiences an unprecedented joy, greater than the one when he was accepted into the community and left behind his past as an outcast. The moment also marks the approach to the final stage of his transition from margin to center. "The young man felt himself soaring through the air as a bird does, and experienced a happiness greater even than the joy he had felt when Good Running had adopted him as a grandson." By becoming the first Blackfoot to ride a horse, the boy takes a decisive step toward centrality within the historical system. His successful journey into the mythical world is about to reposition him historically speaking. The final step will consist in acquiring the horse from the mythical realm and bringing it to the village. At this point, he learns that the spirit chief was a sort of therianthrope or onocentaur, as his legs were not human limbs but "the glossy leg and firm hoof of an Elk Dog!" Noticing this was his final task in the attempt to acquire horses; once the old chief's secret is revealed, Long Arrow is granted permission to ask for a gift and the logical choice is horses. Upon his return to the village, the boy is not recognized by the members of the tribe, who get scared when they see him on horseback and run to hide.

When Long Arrow arrived at last in his village, the people were afraid and hid. They did not recognize him astride his beautiful Elk Dog but took him for a monster, half man and half animal. Long Arrow kept calling, “Grandfather Good Running, it’s your grandson. I’ve come back bringing Elk Dogs!” (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984: 60)

This moment marks the completion of Long Arrow’s journey – a journey which, as it progressed, moved from a personal level to a collective one, from micro to macrohistory. He is finally acknowledged by the whole community as the author of a great deed, one that benefits the common destiny, and his journey from the margin(s) of history to its center is now completed. By being the main actor behind the process of historicizing the horse, Long Arrow gains historical legitimation on the personal level. The moment also marks a shift in Blackfoot culture and history, which can now be divided between a pre-horse stage, one that people can hardly remember, and the post-horse stage, which coincides with the climax of their society.

“You have indeed done something great, Grandson,” said Good Running, and he spoke true. The people became the bold riders of the Plains and soon could hardly imagine how they had existed without these wonderful animals. (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984: 60)

The story ends with the tribe’s attempt to return to the Great Mystery Lake in the hope of acquiring more gifts from the spirit chief only to discover upon arrival that he had vanished and there were no people, or Elk Dogs, or a tipi in the water – the mythical realm disappeared. This alludes to the idea that before the acquisition of the horse, the creation of the world of the Blackfoot had not been completed and the mythical realm was still accessible. Once the horse enters Blackfoot history, creation is complete and access to the mythical realm is closed. Although not a creation story, since it does not narrate how the first horse was created but explains how it was acquired by the tribe, *The Orphan Boy and the Elk Dog* follows a common pattern, very similar to the one present in the stories I analyzed in my previous studies on this topic: the historical legitimacy of the horse is constructed through a process of de- and re-historicization, which can only be achieved via mythicization.

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