

Historicizing the Horse (II). The Tale of the Wind Horse (Choctaw)

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Abstract: This article continues the analysis of the process of historicizing the horse in Native American cultures by exploring its representation(s) in a Choctaw myth – *The Tale of the Wind Horse*. The horse’s role in transforming tribal life at all levels generated a need to incorporate it in the body of knowledge that provided distinguishable identity and helped set differences of representation between various tribes. And since myths and stories were the repository of tribal knowledge, the horse was submerged deep into the mythical realm - an approach that manifested throughout all horse cultures – in order to make it logically fit in with a tribe’s narrative. In creation myths the horse was tamed, in a cultural sense, and made a familiar presence, in a historical sense. The horse was a new historical reality for the Choctaw; embedding it in myth was a method used to internalize it in the tribe’s narrative and the denouement shows a symbolic transfer of the horse from the mythical realm to the historical one. The analysis focuses on how the process of enculturating the horse was conditioned by one of mythicization and historicization.

Keywords: *horse, enculturation, mythicization, (de-/re-)historicization.*

This article continues the analysis of Native American myths that told how horses were created and how they became a valuable cultural asset and an instrument for unprecedented historical development, which I began in the study published in the previous issue of Meridian Critic (no.2 / Volume 35, 2020). To avoid repetition, I will not refer again to the socio-cultural and historical context(s) in which such myths appeared. I would only reiterate the idea that, because of the horse’s role in transforming tribal life in all its aspects, there was a need to incorporate it in the body of knowledge that provided distinguishable identity and helped set differences of representation between various tribes. And since myths and stories were the repository of tribal knowledge, the horse was submerged deep into the mythical realm in an attempt that manifested throughout all horse cultures to make it logically fit in a tribe’s narrative. In creation myths the horse was tamed, in a cultural sense, and made a familiar presence, in a historical sense. Various tribes created different myths in order to tell the story of the horse – of how it was created, culturally incorporated and historicized – and my previous article on the topic focused on 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 current analysis will focus on a very interesting Choctaw horse story, *The Tale of the Wind Horse*, available online¹, which develops in the form of an initiatic journey that leads both characters, Wind Horse and a boy who had no name, to death and, through their disappearance, horses are given to the people. Compared to the three Blackfoot myths mentioned above and analyzed in my other article, this one does not explain how horses came into being, but rather explains the process through which horses became a part of Choctaw culture and history.

Like in the case of most Native American myths, the action of *The Tale of the Wind Horse* is placed in the *illo tempore*, at a time when the process of creation appears to not have yet been fully completed, as “day and night were still deciding who comes first.” The existence of a horse at a time when the creation of the universe had not been accomplished highlights the importance that the horse was given in the collective mind of the tribe; in other words, at a time when the universe was not yet complete, a horse had been completed. More than that, the opening paragraph, which anchors the story in terms of temporality, tells us something about the fate of this horse, which will not be similar to that of “the dying buffalo, for this horse had no enemies.” What I notice here is a mixture of mythical time and historical time: though placed in the mythical time, it is contextualized by means of a reference to a historical reality – the slaughter of the buffalo. From this perspective, we can infer that the story was told during or immediately after the near extinction of the buffalo. This is an interesting aspect to bring into discussion because both the appearance of the horse and the disappearance of the buffalo were historical events that most tribes internalized in a similar manner: through myths. It reminds me of a myth that I analyzed in the third chapter of my study [Șerban 2014] dedicated to the concept of time in Native American cultures, *When the Buffalo Go*, told by the Kiowa, in which the storyteller (re)contextualizes the disappearance of the buffalo in the mythical space. This was an approach used by many tribes faced with the overwhelming realities of a new historical context, one that put an end to their traditional knowledge, values, and way of life. Processing historical reality with the instruments of myth was an attempt to make it more understandable and, to some extent acceptable. This is a reflection of Ricoeur's theory of the boundary situation [Ricoeur 1991]: faced with the possibility of historical annihilation, the tribes sought refuge in their traditional body of knowledge, myths, in order to reassert their core identity. Myths become the bearers of all possible worlds (this is, in fact, the title of Ricoeur's essay); submerging a historical event into myth represented a way of making the unbearable somehow bearable. “In fact, the storyteller and, through him, the whole tribe, tries to avoid the danger of historical disappearance by escaping to the mythical realm – the body of traditional knowledge where history and its destructive ways are annihilated. Therefore, the storyteller combines the acknowledged power of myth

¹ FirstPeople (<https://www.firstpeople.us/FP-HTML-Legends/TheTaleoftheWindHorse-Choctaw.html>), copyright: Teresa JanicePittman.

with the uncontrollable, yet assumed dimension of history in order to find a way out of an overwhelming reality.” [Șerban 2014: 155] Returning to the opening paragraph of *The Tale of the Wind Horse*, though not specified, it can be assumed that the enemies mentioned by the storyteller were the white men. More than that, I consider that in this statement the storyteller embedded another historical reality: the white men were enemies of the buffalo, but not of the horse. The buffalo presented no significant historical value for the whites and it had to be hunted to the point of near extinction in order to put an end to the traditional way of life of the cultures dependent on it, while the horse was a major component of their historical paradigm. A third detail that is mentioned in the beginning of the story and which I consider relevant for an appropriate decoding of the text is the idea that this horse “will never be seen again.” This detail gains more meaning as the story unfolds and the reader understands that this horse functions as an archetypal representation of its kind.

Thus, we are told that Wind Horse showed a lot of kindness and was a rather unique presence – “[...] was the fastest and gentlest of all the Indian ponies.” Moreover, it had a special relationship with the members of the tribe, as the storyteller explains:

He felt no fear, there was not one that would harm him. If there was an Indian wounded or that needed a ride, Wind Horse was there to care and to carry the Indian. Because of the kindness of Wind Horse, there is no more. [*The Tale of the Wind Horse*]

The paragraph above adds one more detail to the temporal structure of the story: the action happens in a time unit when both men and horses existed within the same world/realm, there was interaction between them, but the horses had not yet been given to the people. They enjoyed a state of absolute freedom and only interfered in the lives of humans when their help was needed. Thus, it can be inferred that horses still kept their mythical status and had not yet been historicized, that is, not yet turned into an instrument of history. Their position in the life of the tribe did not yet gain centrality at this point; though inhabiting the same world, which was still in *statu nascendi*, the presence of the horse seems to be somehow peripheral as to the life of the tribe. It is not the will of the people that controls and dictates the relationship with the horse, but it is the will of the horse that makes the interaction possible. It will be the very journey that Wind Horse undertakes in this story, accompanied by the boy he saves, that will help horses shift position and move from what could be considered a marginal position to a central one, which translates in the transcendence from its mythical representation and function to its historical ones. The premises from which the action of the story begins are that Wind Horse, always kind and ready to help an Indian in need, hears a cry for help and finds an Indian boy caught in a bear trap, who could not move because one of his feet had been cut off. Wind Horse’s uniqueness and mythical allure are suggested by the way in which the boy perceives him: “the boy, who had no name, could not believe that this beautiful Horse would come to him as a friend.” The fact that the boy had no name turns him into a symbol for the whole community; individualizing him was not relevant for

constructing meaning in the story because it is his experience that matters. It is thus implied that the character could have been any member of the tribe, but the action and the outcome would be the same. I consider that this perspective is further emphasized by the way in which the boy is further described in the story:

All his life he had lived alone, for with his bad leg no one wanted him. As he rode the wind on the horse, he could feel the good feeling that Wind Horse felt. It was as if he were whole and that he was with family. [*The Tale of the Wind Horse*]

If we consider the boy to be a symbol rather than a distinct individual, then we can extrapolate the meanings stated above: prior to achieving horses, the whole tribe had a bad leg and was limping through history, without a sense of wholeness. It is as if creation had not been completed and one more element was needed in order to achieve fulfilment. The missing element was obviously the horse. Close interaction with the horse confers wholeness and a feeling of familiarity, of being at home with those that are close to you. It is an acknowledgement of the fact that Choctaw identity would not have been complete without adding the horse as a constitutive element. Transferring the horse from the mythical realm to the historical one appears like a *sine-qua-non* condition for the completion of identity. The story thus induces the idea that the horse was meant to be given to the tribe and become a pivotal component of its culture, and that the journey the two characters, the horse and the boy, embark on is actually the journey that, at the end, makes possible the transfer of the horse from myth into history.

The journey *per se* begins when the horse understands that the boy's wound could not be healed and that it would be a ride towards the Hunting Ground, that is, towards death. The horse feels sad about this situation, but knows that it is the only viable option. Thus, we realize that the horse travels backwards, as the boy begins to see again glimpses from his own life, and that this is not just a journey towards death, but at the same time a journey back to the time of creation:

As they traveled, the Boy noticed that the trail was always changing. First it was as it was when the Boy had been hurt, then it was as it was when he had been happy. Then it was the time when he had not been born. Soon he saw things that he did not recognize. The Boy became more close to Wind Horse, for he began to fear. [*The Tale of the Wind Horse*]

As the two travel together, they begin to experience a process of mutual enculturation, each of them becoming more aware of the other's reality and feelings. They both adapt to and adopt one another. However, it is interesting to notice that knowledge only belongs to the horse – Wind Horse is the one who initiates the journey, who has an overall perspective on what happens and who decides on the final outcome of the journey. The story explains that Wind Horse could feel the boy's feelings and that he was the last of his race, a race of horses that could feel their riders. These horses, we are told, would eventually share the fate of the rider, "for then a bond would be made that would not and could not be broken. Wind Horse

knew of this bond, and as a result, always put off the rider before any bond was made.” This representation of the horse as a repository of knowledge and endowed with supernatural powers was also present in the three Blackfoot myths which I analyzed in my previous article. As a creature that manifested strong mythical connotations, the horse was attributed transformative powers and abilities that would make an impact on the tribe’s history. In the case of Wind Horse, the more he listens to the boy, the more he begins to acknowledge and accept the fact that this journey would be his final one:

As Wind Horse listened, he began to feel the love for the Boy that the Boy had wanted to give a friend.

‘Yes,’ Wind Horse thought, ‘This is my last ride for I have found one that needs the feelings that I can give. Since I am the last of my race, I will spend the rest of my time with the one that can and will give the feelings that I need. [*The Tale of the Wind Horse*]

Based on the monologue above, it can be inferred that it is not only the boy who does not feel whole and belonging to a family, but Wind Horse as well. He lacks a special bond with a human, a bond that would allow for feelings to set in, and these feelings are necessary to make him feel complete. As the journey reaches its destination, the Hunting Ground, the process of mutual enculturation is fulfilled and the bond between the two is perfected. Moreover, as the boy dismounts, he discovers that all the problems disappeared: “the boy realized that he had two good legs and that all his wounds, hunger, need, and hurt were gone.” The end of the journey shows the two characters connected through a strong bond and mutual trust: on the one hand, the boy, who experiences fear as they approach the Hunting Ground, relies on Wind Horse for a safe passage; on the other hand, Wind Horse, who is not familiar with the new space, feels confident to explore it in the company of the boy. Prior to this journey, Wind Horse had always avoided bringing his riders to the final destination; that is, he refused to let any bond develop. Thus, as the journey completes, it proves to have been equally initiatic for both the horse and the boy. The interactions they have as they travel transforms them both and, at the end of the ride, they emerge as different personas compared to the moment when the journey began. Wind Horse’s transformation appears to be more profound, and we witness his acculturation to the boy’s perceptions and realities; in fact, it is this very ability to understand the boy’s reality, to perceive and understand events and the world through the boy’s feelings that causes the deepest transformation. I have mentioned above the fact that, unlike the boy, who recognizes there his ancestors (“The Boy looked up and saw the home of those who had gone before.”), Wind Horse is unfamiliar with the Hunting Ground. However, the horse decides to remain because “he had a new world to explore, and he had a friend to explore it with.” We could look at this as a symbolic transition of the horse from his own realm, one of absolute freedom (“was feeling the good feeling of being free”), to the realm of the boy, in which the two are eternally bonded. In other words, through the bond that is built during the journey, a new context is projected, one in which the boy

learns how to listen to and understand the horse and the horse, in its turns, learns how to feel the boy, remain by his side and consider him a friend for unknown journeys ahead. Thus, a principle is born, a pattern of cultural and historical behavior between men and horses. I consider that it is here that the story reaches a climax; up to this point, the main purpose was to narrate the birth of a cultural pattern so that listeners/readers are reminded of it. This also reasserts the formative function of storytelling and the didactic function that myths had in Native American cultures.

The Tale of the Wind Horse ends with the description of the impact that the departure of the two characters has on the members of the tribe, who “felt a great sadness. Even though the People could not know what was happening, the feeling of great loss and unhappiness was all around.” It is at this point that Wind Horse takes one final decision, that of giving the horse to the people.

Wind Horse had made his last journey. He would miss all his travels and the friends that he had made and helped along the way. He prayed to the Great Spirit to send a reminder to the Indian People of the friendship that he and the Indian People had shared. And with Wind Horse’s prayer, the Horse was given to the Indian People as friends. [*The Tale of the Wind Horse*]

As the story ends, the horse is historicized: the denouement shows a symbolic transfer of the horse from the mythical realm to the historical one, a transfer initiated by Wind Horse’s will and accomplished by the Great Spirit. Similar to the Blackfoot myths I analyzed in *Historicizing the Horse. The Case of Three Native American Myths*, explaining the origin of the horse involves two distinct stages: one of *mythicization*, which constructs the image of an animal with supernatural powers, and one of *historicization*, which explains how it was given to the people. What is particularly interesting in the case of this Choctaw story is the idea that the mythical animal, Wind Horse, had to disappear and move to another world in order for the historical horse to emerge in this world and become part of the tribe’s culture. This appears to be a common paradigm among Native American horse cultures, which had to internalize the animal in the tribes’ narrative. The presence of the horse and its impact upon their histories and cultures could not be processed as such; a process of enculturation, which involved changes and adaptations of beliefs, behaviors, and ideas, was necessary in order to allow the horse occupy a central position in their social system. In this particular story, the process of enculturation overlaps a symbolic spatial repositioning of the horse in the plot, in the sense of a Hegelian movement from margin to center: in the beginning of the story, horses interact with people from a marginal position – they choose when to respond to those in need and when and how to interact, but they never stay; as the story ends, we find the horse in a central position, together with the people, enjoying a bond of close friendship, sharing feelings, beliefs, and journeys, in the sense of experiences, that unite them.

The acquisition of the horse and its physical presence in the life of the tribes represented an undeniable historical fact, but that fact had to be compatible with their cultural framework. Thus, the horse had to be (re)framed to fit the cultural and historical logic of the Native American mind, with distinct references to particular cultural settings. This process implied a symbolic uprooting of the horse from its historical reality, which makes it *de-historicized* (removed from its immediate historical context), followed by a mythical embedment (*mythicization*), which was often achieved through creation stories that explained its supernatural origins and provided patterned series of (inter)relationships between the horse and an individual or a tribe, and ended with a historical rebirth of the animal (*a re-historicization*), as a myth-derived presence, and a cultural reintroduction in the preexisting framework. All these three stages are identifiable in *The Tale of the Wind Horse* and they explain how horses and the Choctaw came to form a coherent whole.

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