

## Historicizing the Horse (V). *The Swift Blue One (Tejas)*

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**Abstract:** This is the fifth study in a series dedicated to analyzing the process of historicizing the horse in Native American cultures and it focuses on its representation in *The Swift Blue One*, a Tejas/Caddo story. The blue horse in this story is drafted as a synergistic coalescence of history and myth (it manifests spiritual powers in a factual context) and this allows the narrative to historically legitimize and mythically dimensionalize it. As the horse transfers meaning(s) from Spanish to Tejas culture, it also ensures a cross-realm navigation of representation(s), an approach consistent with the usual myth-historical background in Native American stories. Rather than trying to explain the historicization of the horse in Tejas culture, the story narrates what can be considered a precursory stage, that of the emergence of the first herds of mustangs – the Spanish horses that became wild and ran in herds, which, in their turn, would set in motion the incipient phase of historicizing the horse.

**Keywords:** *horse, mythicization, historicization, conceptual dimensionalization of culture.*

This is the fifth consecutive study in a series intended to investigate the complex process of historicizing the horse in Native American cultures and it focuses on story told by the Tejas, *The Swift Blue One*, collected by Bessie M. Reid in 1936, retold and published by Florence Stratton in *When the Storm God Rides: Tejas and Other Indian Legends*<sup>1</sup>. Compared to the previous texts analyzed in this series of studies (*Thunder's Gift of Horses*, *Water Spirit's Gift of Horses*, *How Morning Star Made the First Horse* and *The Orphan Boy and the Elk Dog* – all Blackfoot, *The Tale of the Wind Horse* – Choctaw, *Ghost Stallion* – Yinnuwok, and an untitled story told by the Dinè), this one narrates a different perspective on the origin of the horse and offers, from the beginning, a direct connection with the early Spanish explorers. All previous stories followed a pattern of de-historicizing of the horse, by uprooting it from historical fact, followed by a process of re-historicizing it, which consisted in a culturally-enframed rebirth of the animal. This pattern represented a collective effort that manifested across various tribes and cultural regions and aimed at transforming the horse into a cultural asset devoid of any connection with white invaders or settlers. The fact that this story begins with a direct association of

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<sup>1</sup> The text is available online at <https://sacred-texts.com/nam/se/wsgf/wsgf15.htm>.

the horse with the Spanish could indicate that this was a story told after the 'conquest' and decline of Native American cultures or that it was altered through various retellings. Therefore, unlike the other stories, which placed the first contact with horses in the *illo tempore*, *The Swift Blue One* openly admits the absence of the animal from Native American histories and cultures prior to the early stage of contact with the Spanish explorers and assumes a lack of knowledge in adequately decoding the animal's physical appearance:

There was a time when the Indians had never seen a horse. When the first Spanish explorers brought horses with them in their ships to this country the Indians looked with great wonder upon the strangers as they rode, and thought that the horse and the man on its back were one animal. As time passed the Indians learned their mistake, but it was long before they were able to get some of the strange animals for themselves and to find out how to talk to them.

The unfamiliarity of the horse is also suggested by the acknowledged lack of a proper means of communication. Language played a vital role in Native American communities and most of them believed that successful communication with the animal world could be achieved through sacred language. In his groundbreaking study on Native American storytelling, William K. Powers stated 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 1986: 30) The fact that the appropriate language for communication with horses was not yet mastered by the Tejas indicates that the animal had not yet been acculturated. Therefore, the story focuses on a time when the horse was a historical presence, but not a cultural asset. The transition from the historical horse to the culturalized one could only be completed through language. In this light, it can be inferred that the story unveils the process of the Tejas' adaptation to the horse and the horse's adoption into Tejas culture.

After the introductory paragraph, in which the horse was historically contextualized, the story migrates towards the mythical realm. As the historical horse is gradually replaced by the mythical one, we are told of a supernatural great blue horse that originated in Spain, "with fire in his eye and lightning in his hoofs". In Native American cultures, the color blue generally symbolized the sky, water and the spirit world, but also wisdom peace and spiritual awareness. Through its color, this horse connects the telluric with the celestial, an aspect that imbues it with spiritual connotations. The tribe kept the blue horse in high regard and merely enjoyed its presence among them. Only one member of the tribe succeeded in riding it; however, upon his death, the other members of the tribe decided to free the horse.

The Indians of the country around never tried to catch him, but let him roam as he willed. To them this wild, free animal was a visitor from another land, from Spain, from a country which had sent powerful men in steel armor to them. Only one of the Indians had dared to ride the blue horse and he was the bravest of them all. When he died the Indians set the horse free, for there was fire in his eye and lightning in his hoofs.

At this point, the storyteller informs us that the events about to unfold will focus on the story of this blue horse, which the tribe feared very much because of its cultural unheimlich-ness. In this context, the horse appears as a representation of cultural otherness, a component of a non-internalized cultural identity that existed outside the limits of tribal knowledge. As the story suggests, to the Tejas the horse was a physically familiar presence, but an unfamiliar spiritual element and this deterred communication with the animal.

An intriguing aspect of this story is the positioning of a mythical horse in what appears to be a rather accurate historical context, identifiable as the Southeastern Woodlands, where early Spanish explorers intersected Native American tribes. In this historically conflicting environment, the mythical horse is contextualized as a friend of the foe and a source of fear for the members of the tribe. Thus, when a young Native American warrior kills the Spaniard riding this blue horse, he discovers that the horse tried to defend the wounded rider:

A young Indian brave saw a Spanish warrior riding the horse through the hills. The Indian was afraid of this tall Spaniard wearing steel armor and riding the horse covered with silk trappings, but he rose from the grass and fired an arrow. The arrow struck the Spaniard through a crack in his armor and the man fell to the ground. His horse stopped and stood over him. Rushing from the grass the young Indian hurried toward the fallen man intending to shoot him again. The horse snorted and pawed the earth and the Indian became frightened and lowered his arrow.

The insertion of a mythical horse in a historical context reiterates a recurrent pattern in Native American horse stories, based on which the Native American mind could process the horse only through myth. Objectively speaking, a Spanish warrior would have been more of a challenge when on horseback than when on foot, but the young Native American does not decode or interpret the horse as an enemy, even though it inspires fear. Moreover, he thinks of a way to interact with the horse but he lacks the necessary cultural instruments. Once again, the horse is projected as belonging to the other culture and represented as an object of desire: “How was he to drive the angry horse away? He did not know. None of the Indians knew how to talk the horse language. He shouted. The horse only snorted again and bared his white teeth. The Indian backed away with a look of surprise on his face.” He wants to engage the horse but the linguistic barrier hinders cultural contact and interaction. This inability to culturally connect to the horse was present in most of the other stories analyzed in this series of studies, but the main difference resides in the spatial and temporal difference(s) where contact is initiated. The primordial, mythical space of the other stories is replaced by a historical one, while the mythical time is replaced by historical time. This results in a different perspective upon the horse and its meaning(s) – it is no longer a gift from the gods, but a cultural asset of the enemy, and, perhaps more surprisingly, the help in initiating dialogue does not come from some deity of other supernatural being, but from the enemy.

Seeing that the Indian did not know how to talk to the horse, the wounded Spaniard made signs to tell him that if he would spare his life he would teach him the horse language. The Indian nodded and grunted. So it happened that the people of his tribe were surprised to see the young Indian riding into camp that day on the blue horse and holding the wounded Spaniard before him.

All the other stories relied on a framework that completely excluded the white man from the background or events narrated and assumed Native American universality and primacy in contact with the horse. This approach relied on an initial de-historization of the horse (a stage in which the animal was extracted from its historical reality and stripped of its meanings in the alien culture), followed by a re-historicization (the reconstruction of its identity based on the tribe's cultural standards). Contrary to this widespread pattern, *The Swift Blue One* tackles the issue from a more historically accurate angle and remains rooted in fact. The horse itself and the knowledge to interact with and handle horses belong to a different culture and the tribe is hesitant to engage in direct contact. Since culture is a collective phenomenon [Hofstede, 1980] and the cultural representation and perception of the horse is the result of a collective programming of the mind, it can be concluded that the storyteller narrates a *pre-horse stage* of Tejas culture. This also explains the lack of cultural, including linguistic, tools to approach the horse. Thus, the horse appears as a cultural element that needs to be transferred and implanted into Tejas culture and this process would require some sort of cross-cultural mediation. Physical acquisition of the blue horse would not ensure its enculturation unless accompanied by an adoption and internalization of meanings and attitudes towards it. And, as the story continues, the necessity for an initiator of this process of cultural transfer becomes evident. In the other stories analyzed in this series of articles one member of the tribe usually initiated this process and this aspect indicated an active response to the horse. The Tejas story, however, presents what can be considered a passive or reactive response to the animal. Lack of knowledge of the horse generates fear and makes the character of the story “back away with a look of surprise on his face” – so he rather withholds than engages. Therefore, in an unprecedented twist, but one that could be more historically accurate, the enemy becomes the mediator and he helps culturally translate the horse into Tejas. Since culture is learned and not inherited, the Tejas are taught horse culture by the dying Spaniard:

Over and over the Spaniard said the words which people use to horses to make them go or stop or run or walk, until the Indian learned how to speak them. At last the Spaniard died of his wound, but not before he had taught the Indian the horse language.

At this point, the didactic function of stories and storytelling in Native American cultures becomes evident. Through constant telling and retelling, the story fulfilled its function, that of reminding the members of the tribe how knowledge of the horse had been acquired.

Although its historical contextualization is completed, the blue horse in the Tejas story retains its mythical dimension and, as such, it still causes precaution and fear. In structuralist terms, the blue horse appears to be a

mytheme – it establishes a relationship between a character, an event, and a fundamental theme, that of the historicization of the horse. Moreover, it appears that the hero of the story rides a mythical horse in a historical context: “Now the young brave was not afraid to ride the animal, but he was afraid to take from the horse the sky blue covering, because he thought it was a magic cloth needed to keep the horse from kicking the babies of the tribe and biting at the Indians’ heads.” Thus, the horse is drafted as a synergistic coalescence of history and myth (it manifests spiritual powers in a factual context) and this allows the story to both historically legitimize and mythically dimensionalize it. As the horse transfers meaning(s) from Spanish to Tejas culture, it also ensures a cross-realm navigation of representation(s), an approach consistent with the usual myth-historical background in Native American stories. But knowledge of the horse is not fully internalized in Tejas culture and, implicitly, the process of acculturizing it is not completed. Meaning(s) were only transferred to the young warrior, not to the whole tribe, which continues to manifest, culturally speaking, the same fear of and reluctance to interact with the “horse:

The great blue horse was fast as the wind. He could skim across the prairies like the cloud shadows, and his flying hoofs beat the ground like the roll of thunder in the summer sky. His master named him The Swift Blue One. The other Indians would not come near him. They did not know the horse language, and they were afraid he might dash them to the ground and slash them with his hoofs.

Horse language is not yet universalized across Tejas culture and the death of the warrior marks a collective return to the initial stage of the horse’s cultural construction. Unable to tackle its presence in their midst, the tribe decides to free the blue horse:

When at last the master of the horse was killed in battle the Indians decided they would get rid of him by turning him out on the prairie to roam away. They took him from the camp and turned him loose with the silk covering still on his back.

At this point, it becomes evident that the horse was acquired spiritually rather than physically. Historically speaking, the blue horse is a transitory presence in Tejas culture, but conceptually speaking, it can be inferred that its impact would endure – the tribe finds out that horse language can be learned and horses can be mastered. Therefore, its role was not to accomplish the historicization of the horse, but to exemplify how horses could be historicized. This also explains why it keeps its mythical dimension throughout the story and why the storyteller retains its mythicity. As represented in this story, the blue horse manifests a mythic consciousness and acts and is perceived as an archetypal version of the animal, without being pulled into the cultural frame of interpretation of the Tejas: “And so it happened that for a long time a lonely blue horse roved across the country, sometimes running and stirring up the dust in clouds and always calling out for others of its own kind.” In this light, a logical question may arise: if the blue horse does not accomplish the process of historicizing the horse in Tejas culture, when and how did that happen? The story offers an indirect answer through its closing paragraph:

Finally other horses did come. They escaped from their Spanish owners and came to live with this lonely blue horse with the strips of silk covering flying from his back and neck. He became king of them all. The children of these Spanish horses became wild and ran in herds, and many of them were the children of the great blue horse from far away Spain.

Rather than trying to explain the historicization of the horse in Tejas culture, *The Soft Blue One* explains how the horse entered the tribe's geohistorical areal. With its mixture of historical and mythical elements, the story narrates what can be considered a precursory stage, that of the emergence of the first herds of mustangs – the Spanish horses that became wild and ran in herds, which, in their turn, would set in motion the incipient phase of historicizing the horse. In this transient episode, collective intentionality is not yet developed and the horse is not ascribed to the collective mind. To conclude, the story is constructed like an underlying element in the complex process of historicizing the horse: it first explains the extraction of the horse from its culture of origin, then introduces it as a latent presence in Tejas history and culture, while the closing paragraph anticipates the future development of horse knowledge and awareness.

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