

Historicizing the Horse (VII). *Sky Dogs* (Plains Blackfeet)

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Abstract: After the introduction and spread of the horse across North America, Native American tribes vividly engaged in a complex process of historical assimilation and cultural internalization of the new animal. Numerous stories were created with a view to logically accommodate the horse and make it an integral part of tribal existential narrative(s). Most such stories relied on an archetypal representation of the horse, depicted as having mythical origins and supernatural powers, on the one hand, and as being a repository of knowledge, on the other hand. *Sky Dogs*, a story told by the Plains Blackfeet/Piegan, explains how the first horses came into existence and how they first appeared to the Blackfeet. The beginning of the process of historicizing the horse is set in an ahistorical time. However, the context is historically anchored, as it described the tribe as a nomadic one, constantly on the move, with all their belongings being carried on travois pulled by dogs as they roamed across the plains. The loose, indefinite temporality of the story (*a long, long time ago*) immerses the events in a time when Blackfeet culture is already shaped and functional, but unaware of the existence of horses. When it comes to the process of historicizing the horse, *Sky Dogs* presents similarities with other stories analyzed in this series of articles, especially when it comes to the three stages behind it: *de-historicization* (extraction of the horse from the immediacy of historical fact), *mythicization* (transfer of the horse to the mythical realm), and *re-historicization* (the horse is acquired from the mythical realm and becomes an active component of tribal culture and history). It also highlights the transformative power of the horse through direct allusions and references to the many ways in which it reshaped daily life among the Piegan.

Keywords: horse, historicization, mythicization, mythism.

After the introduction and spread of the horse across North America, Native American tribes vividly engaged in a complex process of historical assimilation and cultural internalization of the new animal. Numerous stories were created with a view to logically accommodate the horse and make it an integral part of tribal existential narrative(s). Most such stories relied on an archetypal representation of the horse, depicted as having mythical origins and supernatural powers, on the one hand, and as being a repository of knowledge, on the other hand. The previous stories examined in this series of analyses (*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, an untitled story told by the Diné, *The Swift Blue One*, collected from the Tejas by Bessie M. Reid

in 1936, and *The Dun Horse* – a story told by the Pawnees, included in George Bird Grinnell's compilation of stories) showcase the complex process of incorporating the horse in the cultural framework of the tribe(s) by means of stories (literature) so that the collective mind could reason about the origins and nature of the animal. The transformative role of the horse was highlighted through sets of narratives constructed around an illustrative transformation of the animal from an unfamiliar element to a definitory one. Horse myths largely focused on an ideological movement of the horse from the outside of the existing cultural framework to the inside or from a peripheral position to a central one (in Hegelian terms (Hegel 2004)).

This article explores the representation of the above-mentioned process in a story told by the Plains Blackfeet, *Sky Dogs*, available online.¹ It explains how the first horses came into existence and how they first appeared to the Blackfeet. The beginning of the process of historicizing the horse is set in an ahistorical time, when the Blackfeet still lived in the sky. However, the context is historically anchored, as it described the tribe as a nomadic one, constantly on the move, with all their belongings being carried on travois pulled by dogs as they roamed across the plains. The loose, indefinite temporality of the story (*a long, long time ago*) immerses the events in a time when Blackfeet culture is already shaped and functional, but unaware of the existence of horses:

A long, long time ago we had to walk and walk from sky to sky, from camp to camp. Our dogs carried our rawhide bags and pulled our travois sleds. We walked so much that we wore out many moccasins going across the plains.

First contact with horses is always introduced through a sudden, unexpected encounter, when the tribe marvels at the presence of the unknown animal. In this story, horses appear in a mythical context, from Old Man's sleeping room, who was the creator of the world and the trickster in Blackfoot mythology. The interesting element here is the association between horses and two Kutani men, who appear to possess knowledge on the art of horsemanship. The introduction of the horse through an opposing culture is a recurrent narrative in Native American horse stories. At the same time, as is often the case with Native American horse myths, the animals are first associated with the elk and the uncommon aspect of the tails induces the idea that these are made of straw:

All of a sudden, one day, coming from Old Man's sleeping room, west of the mountains, we saw some strange looking beasts. They were as big as elk and they had tails of straw. Lying across the backs of these beasts were two Kutani men. One beast was pulling a travois sled. We became afraid because we did not understand.

First contact with the horse generates a fear of otherness, of that which is culturally unknown. Fear of the unknown was a structural component of the tribal habitus and the fact that the horse lacked cultural identity and affiliation leads to socio-cultural anxiety. Non-historicized, the horse belongs to a different

¹ <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/curriculum/units/1998/2/98.02.02/10>, accessed on April 4, 10:36 am.

cultural realm, one for which, the storyteller implies, the Blackfeet did not have adequate interpretative instruments. Unfamiliarity of the animal hinders proper cultural apprehension during the first contact and the horse remains outside the cultural borders of Blackfeet culture. This cultural anxiety seems to manifest across the tribe and even the children acknowledged as being the most courageous ones fall victims to it. However, in this context, which reminds of Paul Ricoeur's theory of the boundary situation [Ricoeur, 1991], Blackfeet ethnocentricity is reasserted by the men of the tribe. While the horse itself was an unknown element, those who mastered it, the Kutani, are referred to as a familiar representation of otherness. Historically speaking, the Piegans, one of the three Blackfoot tribes, were known to launch raids, particularly in small groups, to steal horses from enemy tribes, such as the Crows. Most of these raids were carried out by members of the tribe who were in search of personal achievements and status or simply sought revenge. The main purpose of Native American myths was to instruct, to pass on knowledge from one generation to the next, and at this point in the story, the didactic function emerges. The reassertion of the Piegans' power in the socio-historical context of the Plains restores tribal identity and is meant to cast out the fear of the young boys – "As I looked around I saw that they were afraid. They all had big eyes and four of them had their hunting bows aimed". In this context, history beckons to the Piegans to reinstate their identity and the symbolic power that results is automatically transferred unto the representation of the horse.

My best friend, Jumps-Over-the-Water hid behind his mother's skirt. The bravest of all of us known as Running Bear, ran behind the nearest tipi to hide. I was so frightened I could not move. I was away from the safety of my father's tipi. The men in our tribe yelled that we were not to be afraid - that we were the mighty Piegans who took the land sway from the Kutani.

It is evident that the Piegans lack an intersubjective cultural representation of the horse and this prevents them from developing direct identification with the horse culture. However, the chief of the tribe, Long Arrow, possesses knowledge related to the horse and he laughs at the reaction of sheer fear manifested by his tribe. He describes the horse through association with familiar, preexisting cultural elements and reveals the origin of the unknown animal, which is said to come directly from Old Man. This perspective places the horse in the realm of myth, following a pattern that has been identified and analyzed in most of the stories included in this series of articles. Historicization of the horse implied a process which started with its de-historicization, which symbolically transferred the animal into the realm of myth. Both the conceptualization and the contextualization of the horse in mythical terms provided the basis for an acceptable construction of the animal's identity. It is obvious that the white man had to be erased from the story of how horses came into being and how they were first acquired by the tribes; as a result, the horse is extracted from the accurate historical context and reconfigured within a mythical one. The story ignores historical immediacy and reconstructs horse-related facts from a mythical perspective. As a result, the horse loses its historical origins and

gains mythical ones. The Native American mind envisaged a micro universe and lived in a historical system which were anchored in and processed through myth. Myth, as the bearer of possible worlds (in Paul Ricoeur's terms), altered historical immediacy and built a world in which the horse was a supernatural animal, offered to the tribes by the creator itself.

Then our chief Long Arrow laughed. He said, "These are from Old Man. They are a gift like the elk, antelope, buffalo and bighorn sheep they are called Sky Dogs".

It is interesting to notice the fact that this story, in its didactic function, focuses on what could be interpreted as storyteller (narrator) reliability. The mythical origins of the horse had to be unquestionable and accepted as a general truth. Such a perspective would have ensured an intersubjective representation of the horse, thoroughly aligned with personal and communal cultural values. Intersubjective cultural representation allows the individual to strongly adhere to and identify with a particular culture. In this case, Piegan society had to provide the larger framework for the horse culture to function and its functionality was dependent on each individual's acceptance of the story of the horse. Thus, the narrative of the origins of the horse is attributed to Long Arrow, the chief of the tribe, described as repository of tribal knowledge whose reliability could not be questioned. As the story goes, "[...] Long Arrow was very smart because he had walked around the Earth seven times from the Porcupine Hills down to the mouth of the Yellowstone. Everyone became quiet and trusted his knowledge." Acceptance of Long Arrow's credibility automatically implied credibility of the story of the first horses. He is the first to name the horse, Sky Dog, and he does that by means of association with a preexisting historical fact (Plains tribes used dogs to carry personal belongings as they moved camp), combined with the mythical dimension inherently attributed to the animal. Long Arrow's social status and level of knowledge allow for a general acceptance of his version of the story of the origin of the horse. As a repository of tribal knowledge, he initiates the process of historicizing the horse, following the three steps generally present in Native American stories: *de-historicization* – *mythicization* – *(re)historicization*. To the Native American mind, mythism of the horse was a compulsory stage in incorporating it within the collective's common representation of culture. In order for the horse to both culturally identifiable and identifiable with, it had to undergo a process of cultural reconstruction.

We waited for the Sky Dogs to reach our camp. We waited bravely with our sacred herb, *nawak'osis*, ready for smoking. When they reached our camp we saw that there were two Kutani men and a Kutani woman in the travois sled. We took the three ill Kutani in but the medicine man could do nothing for the men. They died before they could tell us about the Sky Dogs and how they came to be from Old Man.

This process of culturally redefining the horse implies, among other things, a process of learning through error. Horses enter Piegan culture through an association with dogs, hence the name given by Long Arrow, and this leads to them being fed meat. Acculturation of the horse is built on a lack of any prior knowledge and, as a result, knowledge related to dogs and dog care is

automatically transferred unto the horse. This perspective in the story is explained in John C. Ewers landmark book on horses in Blackfoot culture, where he concludes: “The horse travois, therefore, appears to have been an adaptation of the earlier dog travois to use with a larger and stronger animal. Some informants claimed the Blackfoot originated the horse travois. This contention cannot be proved or disproved at this late date, but it is a possibility.” (Ewers 1967: 102). However, automatic transfer of knowledge fails and, at last, knowledge is imparted by horses themselves as they show, teach and instruct the members of the tribe how they should be properly looked after. Thus, horses help annihilate cultural unfamiliarity and manifest open intention and willingness to adapt themselves to Piegan culture. This marks the final stage in the process of historicizing the horse, as the animals deliberately contribute to their re-historicization within the Piegan framework.

We took care of the beasts. We fed them dried meat as we fed our dogs. We threw sticks to make them fetch. One Sky Dog ran away. Some say he went back to Old Man. Some say that the coyote got him. The two that stayed showed us they like to eat grass.

Running Bear came sway from his tipi and Jumps-Over-the-Water left his mother's skirt. No one was afraid anymore.

This final stage of the process of historicization also marks the acceptance of the horse as a cultural and historical element which no longer inspires fear, but stirs curiosity and prompts interaction. The horse's entrance into Blackfoot culture opens new cultural dimensions, such as the giving of names. This practice indicates the transformative role horses played in these societies and the level of esteem they enjoyed. More than that, it suggests a very close, intimate relationship between the members of the tribe and the newly acquired animal. The transfer of the horse from the mythical realm to the historical one redefined and reshaped Piegan cultural and historical frameworks.

I went up to the smallest Sky Dog. I touched him gently from hoof to mane. I felt his soft, warm skin. He did not flicker. He did not move. I pressed my face close against his face. He still did not move. Long Arrow smiled at me and gave me the name-He-Who-Loves-Horses.

The end of the story focuses exclusively on the long-term impact of the horse on Blackfoot culture. In fact, the storyteller enumerates the various uses of the horse once it becomes an active presence in their historical system. The process of historicizing the horse has been successfully completed and the initial supernaturality of the animal gave way to its historicity.

The Kutani woman grew well, married my father and we lived in the tipi as a family. She sang to us the story of the Sky Dogs and her people. I learned how to mount and to comb the mane with a bone comb. And I learned how to ride into battle.

In fact, the story encompasses two different perspectives on the origin of horses, but one of them remains untold. *Sky Dogs* accounts for Blackfoot acquisition of horses. However, in spite of the direct references to the Kutani, acknowledged as being directly responsible for bringing the horse to the

Blackfoot, the story of how the Kutani acquired their first horses remains untold, wrapped in the mythical dimension that permeates it. The concluding paragraph of the story alludes again to the story within the story, but does not tell it. The story which the Kutani woman shares with the Piegans remains enveloped in mystery. It is stated, however, that her knowledge of horses was transferred unto them and helped transform their conceptualization of historical endeavors. The arrival of the horse marks the beginning of new historical possibilities. The final line of the story is a direct allusion to the profound transformations generated by the horse – “From this I earned a place in the Council of Warriors.” This statement indicates how the social structure and representation of the Piegan was transformed with the introduction of the horse. This process is explained by John C. Ewers: “Individual ownership of all property other than land was the rule among the three Blackfoot tribes. Even sacred bundles, such as the natoas or Sun Dance bundle, the beaver bundle, and the medicine pipe bundle, which were manipulated for the good of the whole community, were individually owned and were transferred from one individual to another through elaborate ceremonies. Individual ownership of horses followed the Blackfoot pattern of ownership of other property. Blackfoot social stratification was grounded in respect for the right of the individual to own and to accumulate property. In historic times social stratification followed the economic status of the family head, whose wealth was determined primarily in terms of horse ownership.” (Ewers 1967: 240). This perspective reminds of the one analyzed in the previous study dedicated to this topic (*The Dun Horse* – a story told by the Pawnees, included in George Bird Grinnell’s compilation of stories): the horse acts as a historical agent which possesses the capacity to help individuals move from a marginal position to a central one and propels them to the top of the social hierarchy. The didactic purpose of myths among Native American tribes resurfaces at the end of the story as the community is instructed on how to navigate their position across the social hierarchy.

To conclude, *Sky Dogs* offers the Piegans’ perspective on the process of historicizing the horse, a process that presents similarities with other stories analyzed in this series of articles, especially when it comes to the three stages behind it: *de-historicization* (extraction of the horse from the immediacy of historical fact), *mythicization* (transfer of the horse to the mythical realm), and *re-historicization* (the horse is acquired from the mythical realm and becomes an active component of tribal culture and history). It also highlights the transformative power of the horse through direct allusions and references to the many ways in which it reshaped daily life among the Piegan.

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