

Historicizing the Horse in Native American Cultures (VIII). *The Sun's Horses* (White Mountain Apache)

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Abstract: In the prolegomenon to his 1955 landmark study *The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture*, John C. Ewers inventoried multiple reliable and relevant historical sources, including Spanish records, and their subsequent analyses and concluded that the horse entered Native American cultures through the Southwest. One of the first tribes to capitalize on the benefits and potential of the horse was the Apache, mainly through raiding. This early contact must have inspired numerous stories and altered pre-existing ones, in an attempt to incorporate the horse in the tribes' historical and socio-cultural framework. One such story is *The Sun's Horses*, told by the White Mountain Apache, recorded in 1910. In a context that mixes myth with history, the story ignores the creation of the animal itself, which was a primary concern in other horse stories, and explains how the first horses came to the Apache.

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In the prolegomenon to his 1955 landmark study *The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture*, John C. Ewers inventoried multiple reliable and relevant historical sources, including Spanish records, and their subsequent analyses and concluded that the horse entered Native American cultures through the Southwest. One of the first tribes to capitalize on the benefits and potential of the horse was the Apache, mainly through raiding: "Spanish records, dated 1659, reported Apache raids on the ranch stock of the settlements, which continued into the next decade. The Apache carried off as many as 300 head of livestock in a single raid. At the same time the Apache engaged in an intermittent exchange of slaves for horses with the Pueblo Indians." (Ewers 1967: 3) This early contact must have inspired numerous stories and altered preexisting ones, in an attempt to incorporate the horse in the tribes' historical and socio-cultural framework. One such story is *The Sun's Horses*, told by the White Mountain Apache, recorded in 1910 and later included in Goddard's *Myths and Tales from the White Mountain Apache* (1919). The version used for this analysis was included in Rosalind Kerven's *Native American Myths. Collected 1636-1919* (Kerven 2018: 237-245). In contrast to the other stories analyzed in this series of articles (*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, *The Dun Horse* – a story told by the Pawnees, included in George Bird Grinnell's compilation of stories, and *Sky Dogs* – a story told by the Plains Blackfeet), the Apache one seems to be a modified version of a previous story. In a context that mixes myth with history, it ignores the creation of the animal itself, which was a primary concern in other horse stories, and explains how the first horses came to the Apache. The narrative perspective that differentiates this story from others focused on the same topic consists in how historical reality is reframed and mythicized in order to encompass the Apache perspective on the acquisition of the first horses. Temporal linearity and chronology are overruled by the need to portray the horse as an intrinsic component of the tribe's identity and as a factual reality of daily life. The deconstruction of historical accuracy, which was irrelevant to the Native mind, places the story in an ideological space where the Apache and the white people coexisted and competed for the acquisition of the horse. Manipulation of history in order to assert supremacy over the horse was a technique commonly used by the Native mind, but this cultural overlapping of time, subject, and space gives the story a distinct perspective. Historical alterity is replaced by a mythical conviviality that places the two opposing cultures in what could be perceived as a rather hospitable environment, one which subverts factuality and enhances mythicity.

Similar to all the stories previously analyzed, *The Sun's Horses* has a very abrupt beginning, which offers little contextualization and merely introduces the event from which the rest of the narrative unfolds. Such direct beginnings were a reflection of the Native mindset, which considered that all stories were set in a context that was a priori mythical. Since the vast majority of these stories belonged to the category of creation stories, the Native system of knowledge widely accepted that the narrated events were included in an all permeating mythical time inherently accepted by those who shared common or similar cultural foundation(s). As a result, there was no stringent need to constantly reiterate or reconstruct the background that cradled the events. *One day* was a common denominator widely accepted to indicate or allude to the contextual temporality of a story, automatically placing it within the all-encompassing mythical time. This is also a reflection of the role that myths played in establishing the attitudes, values, and beliefs (Campbell 2004) in Native American cultures, where they acted as repositories of a community's conscious and subconscious mindset.

“Old Man Water's daughter lived by herself. One day, she was sitting in her open doorway watching the rising Sun. Its blood-red rays came streaming straight towards her so strongly, that it was impossible to dodge them. Before she knew what was happening, they had entered her. In this way, she became pregnant.” (Ewers 1967: 237).

Once the context set within Native temporal logic and cultural expectations, the sinuous journey of historicizing the horse begins by particularizing the main

character of the story, the son of the Sun, who is introduced as being marked from birth by a very uncommon, even odd physical appearance. The actual journey is set forth by a question, as the boy wants to know the identity of his father.

“When her son was born, it was obvious that he was no ordinary child. He looked very strange; to tell the truth, he was grotesque. His hands and feet were webbed like a duck’s. He had no hair on his head at all. Strangest of all, he had neither ears nor a nose. The grotesque boy grew up very quickly, unnaturally fast. He seemed to be a deep thinker, for he was always asking awkward questions. One day he said to his mother, ‘Why haven’t I ever met my father? Who is he?’” (Ewers 1967: 237).

When he finds out that his father lives in the sky, the strange boy embarks on an initiatory journey, wrapped in a supernatural atmosphere, at the end of which he gets to know his father. Knowledge of his father, in its turn, would enable him to access, both physically and spiritually, the first horses. Like all heroes in mythical stories, the Apache boy has to undergo trials that he overcomes with magical help: “a vast row of cliffs that stretched as far as the eye could see on either side”, “a towering thicket of cacti, stretching to the horizon on either side”, a “humming swarm of mosquitoes,” and “a wide range of mountains.” What is relevant about these trials is the fact that they are all directly related to nature and the environment and all connect to the particularities of the geography of Apache land. Thus, the *mundu nascendi* in which the events unfurl is geo-culturally immersed in the historical reality of the tribe and framed to fit that reality. This ensured a shared, communal familiarity with the time and space of creation, identifiable as Apache, which would be automatically transferred unto the horse once it is moved from the Apache mythical realm to the Apache historical land.

This supernatural journey through a familiar space eventually takes the boy to the Sky World, where he hopes to meet his father, the Sun. Prior to that, he has a series of encounters with emblematic figures of Indigenous Southwestern mythology, including Spider Woman, a symbol of creation, protection, and guidance. As the boy suddenly stumbles several times, he discovers her fine web, which the Apache, along with other Southwestern tribes, thought to be a symbol for the interconnectedness of life. In a voice that the boy finds comforting and familiar, she invites him into her hole and teaches him how to proceed in order to meet his father. The dialogue between the boy and Spider Woman further strengthens the idea of a primordial time characterized by familiarity. In fact, it is this shared cultural spatiality that makes the journey possible – the boy takes advantage of the cultural overlapping between the mythical realm and the realm of Apache history.

“When he tried to continue on his way, he tripped heavily and fell. He jumped back to his feet and took another step, but tripped again. Examining the ground, he soon discovered the cause: a spider’s thread, almost invisible, was stretched right across his path.

‘Grandson,’ called a friendly, voice, ‘where are you going?’ At first the boy couldn’t see who the voice belonged too. Then he noticed a tiny, dark-grey head projecting out of an equally tiny hole in the ground. Spider Woman!

‘Oh, Grandmother’, he answered politely, I’m on my way to visit the house of my father, the Sun.”

‘Poor child,’ said Spider Woman. ‘You’d do better to come into my house instead.’” (Ewers 1967: 238).

Once in the Sky World, the boy’s identity is repeatedly questioned and challenged. Accused of infidelity, the boy’s father, the Sun, does not deny knowledge of his offspring, but decides to test his identity. Thus, for the second time in the story, the grotesque boy has to undergo a series of challenges in order to assert the truthfulness of his quest. It is relevant to notice that, similar to the physical obstacles, which helped contextualize the geographical specificity of Apache traditional lands, the Sun’s tests are culturally inspired from or bound to Apache traditions, such as smoking tabaco and taking sweat baths. Thus, it can be inferred that what is truly tested is the boy’s cultural identity as an Apache and his ability to engage in socio-cultural practices that are representative for the tribe. Moreover, the sweat bath physically purifies and transforms the grotesque boy, making him recognizable and identifiable as an Apache:

“While the grotesque boy was in the sweat-bath, wonderful things happened to him. The webbed skin between all his fingers and toes fell off. A nose grew in the centre of his face, (241) and ears appeared, one on each side of his head. His hair, eyebrows and eyelashes all grew, as did nails on the ends of his fingers and toes.” (Ewers 1967: 241).

It now becomes evident that the events in the story happen at a time when the world is still being created. At this point, elements that allude to the presence of white people are inserted in the narrative and the boy, whose identity shifts construct him as Apache, is invited by his father to choose between weapons he would like to use. The two options are a metal gun and bow and arrows and he inevitably prefers the second. This choice further adds to his identity and perfects his creation as an Apache. This story thus implies that both the Apache and the white people were the result of a singular creation and, through individual choices, they became culturally estranged and separated. The boy refuses the metal gun and this sets him on a different historical and cultural path.

“The boy examined the gun and shuddered. Then he examined the bow and quiver and smiled. He picked them up and shot two arrows. Both hit the target, right in the centre.” (Ewers 1967: 242).

This proves to be a decision that pushes the boy to a marginal position and the other boys, those who chose metal guns, drive him off. He openly assumes it and proceeds to the next leg of his journey which takes him to a valley which separates two mountains, one brown and one yellow, that are culturally divergent. While one of them abounds in elements specific to white culture (“*metal tools and guns, with herds of cattle, goats, sheep, pigs, mules, donkeys and horses wandering around them*”), the other one, perceived as beautiful, serves as the home for an Apache-connected landscape:

“The slopes of the other mountain were very beautiful, smothered in yellow flowers. When the boy peered into that cave, he saw sunflowers, cactus, agave, yucca, pinyon, oaks and juniper. There were also many kinds of wild roots and leaves, all ripe and ready to pick.” (Ewers 1967: 242).

When asked to choose one of the two mountains, the boy prefers the yellow one because “it’s full of good things to feed my people”, but in doing so, he soon understands that the horses will belong to those in possession of the brown mountain, the white men. Not allowed to reconsider his choice, the boy pleads with his father for some of the animals. Thus, while attempting to historicize the horse from an Apache perspective, the story also relies on and incorporates historical accuracy. The actual history of the horse is accepted and, as a direct result, the process of dehistoricizing the animal from its origins is not as acute as in the case of other stories analyzed in this series of articles. The historicity of the horse is encompassed in its mythicity, an approach which generates the adequate context for a repositioning of the animal within the Apache cultural frame.

After the initial refusal, the Sun brings “a magnificent chestnut stallion” and gives it to the boy. With it, knowledge of the horse and horsemanship are automatically transferred to his son. This transfer of knowledge facilitates the physical transfer of the first horse from the Sky World to his mother’s village, that is, from the realm of myth to the realm of history.

“He called the boy over and helped him onto its back. At once the boy knew how to handle the horse, how to ride. He thanked his father, then rode the stallion at a gallop, all the way back to his mother’s house, completing the long journey in a single day.” (Ewers 1967: 244).

However, the role of this stallion remains primarily symbolic. It functions as an instrument used for a secure conveyance of the animal into Apache historicity and collective identity. When it refuses to graze, the boy returns it to the Sun and is offered instead two horses, a stallion and a mare, which quickly adapt to history and become a settled presence on Apache land – “They were the first horses that came into the world.” To conclude, *The Sun's Horses* offers a distinct perspective on how the Native American mind used myth to impart cosmological knowledge, foster collective identity, and strengthen social cohesion. To the extent to which myths are a product of the contexts in which they were created and which they served, this Apache story is a reflection of Campbell’s theory according to which myths are more relevant and truer than history (Campbell & Moyers 1988). The Apache acknowledged the historical reality of the horse but, in the attempt to culturally incorporate and internalize it, chose to mythicize its historicity and retell this process in a manner that was evocative of their collective identity at the time of storytelling. Thus, the story highlights the explanatory and the normative function of myth and reveals how myths were used to legitimize the past.

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