

## **Historicizing the Horse in Native American Cultures (IX). *How the Crows Got Their First Horses (Crow)***

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**Abstract:** A Siouan-speaking tribe, the Crow traditionally occupied lands in the area of Yellowstone (where they still live today) and were renowned buffalo hunters, whose nomadic lifestyle was profoundly transformed by the acquisition of the horse. Quick to capitalize on the new animal, the Crow became expert horsemen and soon got involved in horse raiding and trading, *How the Crows Got Their First Horses* relies on the pattern of mythicizing historical reality in the attempt to culturally internalize the acquisition of the horse. It acknowledges historical accuracy but cannot integrate it in a lucrative, collectively acceptable manner within the Crow system of knowledge. It was through myth, the repository of tribal knowledge and a “bearer of possible worlds” (Ricoeur 1991), that the horse could be ideologically repositioned and historically recontextualized – mandatory stages of a process that led to cultural embeddedness and historical functionality.

**Keywords:** *horse, historicization, mythicization, collective identity.*

A Siouan-speaking tribe, the Crow traditionally occupied lands in the area of Yellowstone (where they still live today) and were renowned buffalo hunters, whose nomadic lifestyle was profoundly transformed by the acquisition of the horse. Quick to capitalize on the new animal, the Crow became expert horsemen and soon got involved in horse raiding and trading, increasingly relying on horses to support their nomadic lifestyle. Moreover, stealing a tethered horse from an enemy camp was one of the four mandatory coups required from a Crow man in order to be accepted as a chief. Occupying such central position in Crow culture, the horse was inevitably integrated in their myths and legends. One such story is *How the Crow Got Their First Horse*, included in Ella E. Clark’s *Indian Legends from the Northern Rockies*, published by the University of Oklahoma Press (1988: 312-314). Compared to the other horse 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, *Sky Dogs* (a story told by the Plains Blackfeet), and *The Sun’s Horses* (told by the White Mountain Apache), the Crow

story is more rooted in historical factuality. The plot follows a series of events which revolve around a nucleus of historicity that is more solid than in the case of other similar narratives. In fact, it is the first story which does not follow the usual pattern adopted by the vast majority of the tribes in the complex process of historicizing the horse, a pattern in which the horse was initially *de*-historicized (extracted from its historicity) and then *re*-historicized within a Native American context. This process generated what was considered to be a logical validation of the animal's presence in the life of a tribe and it always involved an insertion of the horse in the mythical realm. Although elements of the supernatural are present in the story, the action is not placed in the *illo tempore*; the first horse does not come to the Crow at the time of creation but, as its beginning implies, at a time which was historically quantifiable. Thus, the storyteller claims to retell events which happened during the youth of his grandfather and he contextualizes that period with historical accuracy, explaining how dogs and women shared the burden of carrying packs whenever the tribe was on the move. At the same time, he makes a clear distinction between the physical presence of the horse among the Crow and their knowledge of the animal. The excerpt below induces the idea that the Crow did have a sort of idealistic representation of the animal, an aspect which further emphasizes the fact that the story primarily relies on the horse's historicity rather than on its mythicity.

When my grandfather was a young man, the Crows had no horses and did not know what they were except through a vague tribal tradition. Dogs and women carried their packs. When they traveled, women walked with heavy burdens on their backs. Dogs carried the lodges. These were as large as they are now, too heavy a load for a single dog.

So each lodge was divided and carried by two dogs. (Clark 1988: 312)

In light of this beginning, it can be inferred that the Crow approach to historicizing the horse excludes the *unheimlich*-ness stage, present in most of the stories previously analyzed. This stage was a key element in the de-historicization of the horse and it induced the idea that the horse was unknown and that at first it felt strange to the people. In fact, in those stories, the horse's transfer from mythicity to historicity was equivalent to a transfer from unfamiliarity to familiarity. The Crow, however, assume awareness of the animal's existence – they were not in possession of the horse but they did have a sense of its historical presence.

The second paragraph of the story further emphasizes the historical dimension of the events narrated. It makes direct references to the settlement of the Crow on lands in the Yellowstone area and to their acknowledged friendship with the neighboring tribe of the Nez Percé, renowned for their particular interest in breeding horses and for their masterful horsemanship. It is in this historical context that the origins of the horse among the Crow begin to unfold. The acquisition of the horse was not the result of a mythical event or encounter, but of a purposeful visit to the Nez Percé, who were already in possession of the animal. At the same time, this paragraph mentions a former Crow belief in a mythical origin of the horse, initially believed to have come out of a great water in the southeast. Rather than develop on this assumption, the story indicates

that the acquisition of the horse was the direct result of tribal will, manifested through a visit to the Nez Percé. Therefore, it was intentional.

After the Crows reached the Yellowstone country, they were visited by a party of Nez Percés, who offered to trade them some horses. Horses are larger than dogs, the Nez Percés told them, and strong enough to carry heavier burdens. So a party of Crows visited the Nez Percé camp and there saw, for the first time, the large animals which our elders said had once come out of the big water far to the southeast. The Crows purchased a few and set out with them to return to their own camp. (Clark 1988: 313)

From this point onward, factuality mixes with fictionality and the plot plunges into the realm of the myth-historical, often encountered in such narratives. One reason behind this turn could be the unprecedented transformative power of the horse and its deep impact on tribes such as the Crow. To the native mind, which was intrinsically connected to myth and dependent on it, the mere acknowledgement of the historical origins of the horse felt insufficient. The factor which fundamentally reshaped daily life and reconfigured perspectives on the future had to be imbued with a sense of mythicity. One must keep in mind that the main function of myths was to reassert foundational beliefs and patterns of historical and cultural action. Fueled by their didactic dimension, the stories represented the nucleus around which collective identity was shaped and around which it constantly revolved. With which retelling of a story, the mythemes (Lévi-Strauss 1955) were transferred and (re)contextualized in a new historical reality. In order to be functional, any new historical context had to be rooted into and rely upon fundamental and irreducible units of collective knowledge, accepted and unquestioned by the community. A tribe's vision and understanding of the world were encapsulated in myth. Adapting stories to new historical contexts allowed myths to act dynamically and constantly transfer collective knowledge when and where it was needed. As Kroeber argued, "the great age of the stories means they are the result of many reworkings and refinements. These revisions sharpened the efficacy of the storytelling evaluations, assuring the stories' historical wisdom was not dogmatic but dynamic. The stories have been shaped by their function as a means for uncontroversially examining against particular new conditions, psychological and social tensions and pressures that had led to the institution of specific social practices. These practices embodied deeply cherished beliefs and firmly established patterns of behavior because they had worked effectively. Were they as reliable as ever, or did unprecedented circumstances suggest modifications to sustain their efficaciousness?" (Kroeber 2004: 3) The introduction of the horse generated such unprecedented circumstances which, based on the logic above, led to a reconfiguration and adjustment of foundational myths in the attempt to include it in the repository of knowledge that configured and conditioned Crow collective identity. Outside that body of knowledge, the animal would have remained an element of cultural otherness. Its historicization through mythicization, the Crow believed, transferred its meaning(s) and historical potential within the known and commonly accepted limits of their world. Historically, the action of the story is placed only two generations back, but the

sudden departure from historical accuracy, which provided the background for the opening part, highlights the overarching presence and contemporaneity of myth. It is immediately after having purchased horses from the Nez Percés that the narrator's grandfather meets a strange character, whose intervention in the events marks the transcendence of events from the historical realm to the mythical one. Symbolically, the mythical intersects the historical and takes over the course of action as this character offers a new choice of horses:

On the way, my grandfather had a strange and wonderful experience. As he stood near the stream, a man clothed in black from head to foot rose suddenly from the water and stood before him.

“What are you doing in this place?” the man asked my grandfather.

“I have come after horses and am returning home.”

Thereupon the strange man gave a loud call, and at once from the woods nearby pranced a hundred horses of all colors. Most of them were fine animals.

“Take your choice,” said the man in black.

My grandfather chose a handsome, coal-black horse, his favorite of the whole group. (Clark 1988: 313)

In the historical context that opens the story, the horse is historically and culturally unknown to the Crow. Once the context is transformed through myth, perception of and view on the horse shift from unfamiliar to familiar as the Crow appear to possess an intrinsic knowledge of the animal – when asked to mount his chosen horse, the grandfather realized that he knew how to do it. It is therefore implied that knowledge of the horse preexisted in Crow culture in a latent, dormant form and what lacked was a proper context to activate it. As knowledge resided in myth, the appropriate context that could trigger that segment of knowledge had to be embedded in it. This approach was present in other horse historicization stories and it evidences an inherent need to acknowledge and internalize the horse as a preexisting element of collective identity.

“Now mount him,” ordered the stranger. “He is strong and can carry all you wish to put on him. Make haste home, but do not look back. Never under any circumstances look behind you until you have reached your village. If you do not obey my warning, you will have ill luck.”

Although my grandfather had never ridden a horse, he obeyed the command at once. He galloped away, enjoying the motion and the sense of power, knowing that he was traveling faster than any Crow had ever traveled before. As he rode, he heard the constant clatter of hoofs close behind him. He seemed to be followed by a herd of animals like the one he was riding. Was the man in black so generous? (Clark 1988: 313)

In the paragraph above, the unprecedented, transformative impact that the horse had on Crow history is underlined through the use of the word “power” – indeed, the horse was not only a new form of power in itself, it was the factor that triggered a complete overhaul of the meaning(s) of power among the tribes and redefined historical framework(s) and hierarchies. The sense of power brought by the horse facilitated a new understanding of historical might and fostered prospective approaches to the ways in which it could be used and/or inflicted. As Elliot West put it, “what was arguably the greatest contribution,

however, was not made of metal but of flesh and blood—the horse. Its effects, especially on western tribes, were truly revolutionary. It altered their material lives, rearranged their relations with their environments, and fed a burst of power and affluence.” (West 2011) The animal’s natural speed literally sped up Native American history. In an allegorical sense, the unprecedented speed of the storyteller’s grandfather on horseback translates as the unprecedented speed of Crow history in the horse era. By bringing the horse to his tribe, he offers them a new sense of power, history, and identity. “Some groups quickly developed astonishing skills as mounted warriors and proceeded to expand their hunting and trading territories against weaker neighbors. Less apparent were changes in Indians’ perceptions of the world and its possibilities. As they adapted their lives to horses and all they offered, they felt what others must have over the millennia, a burst of confidence, empowerment, and freedom.” (West 2011)

The mythological interlude marks the climax of the story, represented by the acquisition of the horse and its transfer into historicity; after that, it reaches its dénouement with a set of conclusive remarks on how the horse changed Crow history and enhanced new patterns and rhythms of collective behavior. Alongside power, the horse brought ease of living and marked the birth and rise of the horse culture era.

Not only would they take the place of dogs as beasts of burden, but they would carry on their backs the Crow warriors and hunters in all their future travels.

From that time on, the people continued to obtain horses by trading, until they were abundantly supplied. Never since then have the Crows been without them.

“And we put heavy loads upon them,” said Little Face, “because the man in black told my grandfather that they were strong and powerful.” (Clark 1988: 314)

To conclude, *How the Crows Got Their First Horses* relies on the pattern of mythicizing historical reality in the attempt to culturally internalize the acquisition of the horse. It acknowledges historical accuracy but cannot integrate it in a lucrative, collectively acceptable manner within the Crow system of knowledge. It was through myth, the repository of tribal knowledge and a “bearer of possible worlds” (Ricoeur 1991), that the horse could be ideologically repositioned and historically recontextualized – mandatory stages of a process that led to cultural embeddedness and historical functionality.

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