Migration as Creation.
The Case of Two Native American Creation Stories

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Abstract: This article discusses the motif of migration in two Native American creation stories – *The Creation and Early Migrations* (Caddo) and *Old Man Leads a Migration* (Blackfoot). Through this migration, a sine qua non to the fulfillment of creation, people settle in their homeland; once settled, they are taught the fundamental behavioral patterns; ultimately, they acquire collective identity.
Keywords: creation, migration, errand-man, myth, history.

Creation myths represented the cultural and historical foundation of traditional Native American cultures. Each tribe across the major cultural areas of North America (Eastern Woodlands, Southeast, Plains, Southwest, Coastal Northwest, and Arctic) had its own creation story. While some aspects narrated in these stories could be common (in the case of neighbouring or linguistically and culturally related tribes) or could be entirely unique across the area/areas, they all served the same function within the community: creation stories reminded people how the world they lived in came into being, who they were, where they came from, what their cultural and historical origins were, and how they were supposed to act and to behave (an adequate behaviour, based on principles stated in creation stories, would ensure a 'safe' passage through this life). Social existence and historical dimensions were constructed based on the knowledge embedded in these stories. This knowledge was unquestionable and always functioned like a general truth to which the whole community adhered and which was imparted through storytelling. The main function of creation stories was to teach and to instruct rather than to entertain, so retelling or passing on the fundamental truth(s) was the main motivation behind the didactic role of storytelling, which was always imbued with sacred elements. Therefore, the moment chosen for (re)telling these stories was always connected to or rooted in the sacred, such as time renewal rituals or at time of crisis.

While time renewal rituals had always been part of these cultures, with many similarities or variations across Native North America, I consider that the

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(re)telling of creation stories at times of social or historical crisis can be directly connected with the arrival of Europeans and their march westward. Prior to European arrival, tribes did not have the capacity to threaten the very existence of others; moreover, such an approach was not part of their cultures, since victory in intertribal warfare did not equate with total annihilation of the enemy. Conflicts or wars in Native American societies consisted mainly in quick raids and were usually generated by the need for resources, acquiring goods, acquiring prestige or social status (by touching an enemy in battle or stealing his horse, not by killing him – counting coup) or taking captives. The arrival of Europeans shook this order loose and dramatically altered the meanings of conflict / warfare in Native North America. The cultural and historical contextualization of *oneness* and *otherness* also changed and tribes all over the continent had to adapt to new realities in which, more than often, the very existence of a tribe was at stake. Such terrible crises were defined by Paul Ricoeur as *boundary situations* and they always triggered a cultural response which, in the case of Native American tribes, consisted in a return to the myths, particularly those of creation: "There are certain boundary situations, such as war, suffering, guilt, death, in which the individual or community experiences a fundamental crisis. At such moments, the whole community is put into question. For it is only when it is threatened with destruction from within or from without that a society is compelled to return to the very roots of its identity; to that mythical nucleus which ultimately grounds and determines it." [Ricoeur, 1991: 484] The community felt the need to reassert the originary pillars upon which it had evolved, find symbolic shelter in that common body of knowledge, and use the story as an instrument of cultural and historical resistance and/or survival. Creation stories represented a form of sacred truth which, was believed, could guarantee survival when history seemed to come to its end.

A recurrent motif in Native American creation myths is that of the migration (or exile, in some cases). Creation is explained as a geographical movement from one space into another or from one world into another. This spatial migration, in the physical world, is paralleled by an inner one, that occurs within the collective consciousness, which enables the members of a tribe to form a determinate system of values. So, we may speak of a double-layered migration that converges into the birth of cultural and historical identity of a tribe. A migration that settles people in a land and teaches them the body of knowledge that gives them structural identity.

One relevant example of a 'migration as creation' story is the one told by the Caddo, *The Creation and Early Migrations*. Like most stories of creation, this one begins with aspects related to macro-creation:

> "In the beginning the sun, stars, moon, and earth did not exist as they are now. Darkness ruled. With the lapse of time came a man, the only living being. Soon after his arrival a village sprang into existence with many

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> thousands of people, and the people noticed that the man seemed to be everywhere." [Dorsey, 1997: 7-13]

Thus, in a context that is vaguely defined (the components of the macro universe pre-existed human existence, wrapped in darkness), mainly by opposition to the current one ("did not exist as they are now"), the image of the creator is abruptly introduced as someone who arrives in this world of darkness, which seems to be the destination of his journey. Though this is not explicitly stated, we may assume that he was he engaged in a primordial errand, in search of place where he could act as creator, especially if we take into account that the first thing we learn about him is his ubiquitous nature, a common characteristics of god-figures across cultures ("the people noticed that the man seemed to be everywhere"). Later in the story he tells the people that he was the first being created by the Great-Father-Above, who also entrusted him with special powers (the power to create). Was then this creator-being migrating "in the beginning" (the primordial space), exceeding the rules of spatiality and temporality, in search of a place where he could create? Perhaps he was, since he says that "he had to carry out his work" and his arrival coincides with the very moment of creation – "a village sprang into existence with many thousands of people." Is he a creator in himself or is he an instrument in the hands of the Great-Father-Above, a manifestation of his will, migrating across darkness in search of a (new) beginning? Should we, perhaps, refer to him as a 'mid-creator', as someone who instruments creation as part of a pre-existing plan? The act of creation itself is not explained or detailed, but all missing details were part of the sacred knowledge that the tribe collectively assumed and shared. Though not present in the story itself, such elements were inherently "known" by all members of the tribe and considered to be true in an incomprehensive way.

Once the errand/migration of the creator reaches its destination, the world of the first human beings comes into being in the form of a micro-cosmos, a village; being located in the world of darkness, at a time when the universe itself was different, as the storyteller claims, it obviously lacked rules, knowledge, and directions, so the creator had to continue his endeavour:

> "For a time he disappeared, and when he came back he had all kinds of seeds. He called all the people together and told them that the seeds were for them to eat, and gave them to every one. He told them that soon Darkness would go, and the people would see, for Darkness had promised that they should have a man by the name of Sun, and that he should be given power by the Great-Father-Above […]" [Dorsey, 1997: 7-13]

At this point, the disorderly world of darkness begins to transform into a new world, based on instructions given by the creator and governed by principles, a world that would accommodate the newly created village. The didactic function of the story also begins to develop, as people are given

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instructions as to how their world would function they way(s) they should behave. Again, we notice the fact that the storyteller alludes to a pre-existing plan ("Darkness would go", "Darkness had promised"). This complex transformation, which stands for the act of creation itself, is suggested by "and the people would see" – apparently, they could not see before and would be able to see once the ordered world sets in. One could argue that here the story is confusing, in the sense that at the beginning, immediately after their creation, people could notice the ubiquity of the creator, meaning that they could see him everywhere. Yet, based on the fragment above, they could not see yet. So should we understand the act of seeing more like an awakening? To see is to be aware, to understand, to know? In that case, this could be considered *the first migration* of the people – not a geographical one, not a movement from one space or place to another, but one that would lead them to awareness and knowledge. It is an inner, mental migration of each individual and, therefore, of the whole village, towards knowledge and understanding of the world they would live in. This newly created world, still engulfed in darkness, becomes the new centre, with the rest of the act of creation revolving around it. But, as we find out later in the story, it will become itself a margin once people are instructed to migrate, physically this time, to yet another new world; the instructions are given, once more, by the same creator, who is now referred to as "the errand-man":

> "One time the errand-man was sent out to tell the people that the chief wanted them to assemble; that he had very important news to tell them, and that they should come as quickly as they could. When they had come together the chief told them that they would all have to move away from the world that they were living in to another and better world; that he was going to lead them through, for he knew the way. The village which they were going to leave was called Old-Home-in-the-Darkness." [Dorsey, 1997: 7-13]

Migration becomes an indispensable condition for the fulfilment of creation. As people keep being instructed by the creator on what and how to do, they increase their knowledge, migrating within the layers of their collective consciousness and inevitably ascending to superior levels of understanding. As creation advances, the new world progresses and progress triggers the need for change. Not only an evolutive change, at the level of knowledge, but also a spatial/geographical one. Thus, the centre that this new world had become no longer stands and is bound to become the new margin – a space / a place that has to be left behind so that the act of creation could be fulfilled. Macro-creation was fulfilled and it represented the mythical time of the tribe's existence, but micro-creation (the actual beginning of the tribe's historical existence) has yet to happen. I consider this mandatory migration "to another and better world" a migration (in the sense of a departure) from mythical time to historical time. And the story provides evidence in this respect:

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> "The people began moving westward, and they came out of the ground to another world. […] The people's first village in this new world was called Tall-Timber-on-Top-of-the-Hill, for the place was in black-jack timber near the top of a high hill. There was the beginning for the real people." [Dorsey, 1997: 7-13]

Thus, the migration from the Old-Home-in-the-Darkness to Tall-Timber-on-Top-of-the-Hill is the migration from myth, the *illo tempore* of a *mondus nascendi*, to history. A symbolic migration which is, ultimately, the act of creation itself. As people migrate, they emerge into history and creation is accomplished. Once people settle in "this new world", in history, they are given a bow and arrows, the main tools for historical survival, so their historical existence begins. And "the real people" can only exist in this world, as the storyteller reminds that they were instructed "that none of them should ever look back the way they came, lest the people should be stopped and have to stay where they were – in darkness." Migration is a sine qua non to existence itself.

The second creation story that I will discuss in this article is *Old Man Leads a Migration*, collected from the Blackfoot tribe by Clark Wissler and D.C. Duvall. [Wissler and Duvall, 1995] The story is the sixth in the Blackfoot cycle of creation, being preceded by stories that explained how the earth came into being, linguistic diversity, the meanings of life and death, and the first marriage.

The act of creation is attributed to a character named Old Man, who, compared to errand-man, the first man created in the Caddo story, is different. We find out that "no one made Old Man. He always existed." So, in the Blackfoot cosmogony, Old Man appears to be the creator himself. One aspect which is similar to the Caddo story is the lack of details related to the act of creation (actually, most of the Blackfoot stories have a very abrupt beginnings) – they were presumably known by each member of the tribe as part of the Blackfoot cultural repository. However, unlike the Caddo story, in which creation begins at the heart of primordial darkness, in a place that could not be spatially defined or contextualized, the Blackfoot story starts with an (unexpected?) spatial connotation: "The first Indians were on the other side of the ocean, and Old Man decided to lead them to a better place. So he brought them over the ice to the far north." (The presence of the notion of *ocean* is surprising for a story belonging to a tribe which resided in the Great Plains, but it might have been introduced when collecting and translating the original story.) Apparently, instead of placing the migration *in illo tempore*, the story relates directly to the geographical migration of early Native American tribes. Is this a reminiscence, a distant echo of the crossing the Bering Strait on ice to the North American continent? Or, perhaps we should see it the other way round: the real geographical (and historical) migration is submerged in mythical time and thus made part of creation. Either way, migration is, once again, mandatory for a better life; it is a requisite for the fulfilment of the act of creation, turning

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former centers into margins. In both stories, people first exist in what can be referred to as *intermediary worlds* or *spaces*, in which creation is not complete, and the creator asks people to migrate so that he can bring his plan to its goal. Migration is embedded in macro-creation; it cannot be avoided and it seems voluntary, as people agree to engage in it as a necessary step for their betterment. Can these migrations from one world/space to another as Hegelian movements from margin to center? To a certain extent they can, as migration to the new world coincides with the end of macro-creation, when things seem to have been ordered and when the tribe becomes the master (center) of the new context, of its newly created history and culture.

But not all people who migrate as part of the act of creation get to the destination. Just like in the case of the Caddo story, some primordial migrants in the Blackfoot story do not make it to final stage of creation:

> "When they were crossing the ice, the Sarcee were in the middle and there was a boy riding on a dog travois. As they were going along, this boy saw a horn of some animal sticking up through the ice. Now the boy wanted this horn, and began to cry. So his mother took an ax and cut it off. As she did so, the ice gave way, and only those on this side of the place where the horn was will ever get here." [Wissler and Duvall, 1995: 22]

"On this side" and "here" are symbolic representations of the new center, the final stage of creation. Though apparently vague in terms of precise spatial contextualization, they add a homely tone to the story, a feeling of unity and collectivity, and are later replaced by a clear geographical representation: "Now Old Man led these people down to where the Blood Reserve now is, and told them that this would be a fine country for them, and that they would be very rich." This constant oscillation between mythical time and space and historical time and space, between the fictional and the real, was characteristic for the Native American mind. Unlike European ones, Native Americans systems of knowledge were in a very close connection with the religious and/or the magical. According to Clara S. Kidwell, Native American societies used to explain the world around them or refer to their daily experiences in terms of a superior power (in this story, Old Man) which often manifested its power or its will in the physical reality of the community. [Kidwell, 2004] The creation of the macro-cosmos (the universe) and that of the micro-cosmos (the Blackfoot village) are intermingled, just as historical migration and the mythical one are mixed into a single relocation. "He said, 'I will get all the people here'" – migration is a manifestation of Old Man's will and relocating the tribe is the final stage of Blackfoot cosmogony. Here, the structure of the Blackfoot story resembles the Caddo one, as the didactic function emerges from the narrative, reminding people that at this stage, they were not yet similar to what they are at present, in the sense that they did not yet possess the customs or the attributes that would distinguish them from other. In other words, cultural identity had

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not yet been created and, like in the case of the Caddo story, it follows soon after migration is completed: "All the people living there ate and lived like wild animals; but Old Man went among them and taught them all the arts of civilization." Thus, migration also ensures the transition from one mentality to another, from a previous set of values to the present one. The fundaments of Blackfoot cultural and historical identity are attainable through migration; therefore, migration is not just a spatial journey, but also a journey into knowledge, into cultural awareness. A journey into becoming a Blackfoot.

The ending paragraph of the Blackfoot story provides an equally interesting perspective. After having taught the people everything they needed to know, Old Man's task is accomplished – creation is complete. Surprisingly, he then moves to the Sioux tribe, a traditional enemy of the Blackfoot on the Great Plains:

> "When he was through teaching them, he did not die, but went among the Sioux, where he remained for a time, but finally disappeared. He took his wife with him. He had no children." [Wissler and Duvall, 1995: 22]

Should we assume that Old Man, the creator, migrated he himself from one tribe to another? Did he also play a role in the Sioux creation? After all, the story tells us that "he remained there for a time", just like he had remained for a time (the very time of creation) among the Blackfoot themselves. Is he also an errand-man, a migratory creator similar to the one in the Caddo story? The Blackfoot storyteller did not offer further details or evidence to directly support this premises, but some similarities are obvious.

To conclude, the two stories brought into discussion show a pattern of creation based on a mandatory *out*-migration and *in*-migration – advised and led by the creator, people depart from a pre-existing world and travel to a new one, which becomes the axis mundi. Through this migration, people settle in their homeland; once settled, they acquire the fundamental behavioral patterns. Therefore, it is a migration towards collective identity – the main tool for a tribe's historical and cultural survival. When identity is built, creation is complete.

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