

## The Buffalo-Wife: A Crow Indian Story as told by Gray Bull in 1914

The Buffalo-Wife narrative was rendered into the following text to better glean an interpretation embedded within it. It is a literal transcription of the original Crow wording. In this example, I am using a structural framing, isolating key “scenes” and “verses,” each scene of which includes primary actors, actions taken, setting, and theme. The verses are isolated based upon the Crow convention of using a quotative suffix, *tsaruk*, meaning “it/he/she said,” at the end of each specific morpheme cluster, i.e., verse. Based upon research with similar texts, I’ve also added underlining of key morphemes that were likely given intonational emphasis when in the act of telling the story. I’ve rendered the text in an ethno-poetic style to better emphasize its oral nuances. Please keep in mind that here are many ways to engage and interpret the meaning of a text, integrating both head and heart knowledge in so doing.

- A     There is a scabby buffalo.  
      By a spring there is a big muddy place,  
          black with mud.  
      She gets stuck there,  
          she is sitting there.  
      A youth comes there;  
          he has never known woman.  
      It is a female,  
          so he possesses her.  
      Then he sits still for a while.  
      Then,  
          after a long while,  
              when he becomes inflamed with passion,  
              he again possesses her.  
      "Wife,  
          having possessed you,  
          I shall go."  
      Then the young man goes and gets home.
- B     That winter this buffalo becomes pregnant.  
      Then in the spring she gives birth to a child,  
          a male.  
      When it is born,  
          she looks at it,  
              it is human!  
      When calves are born,  
          they walk,  
              that is why straightway he stands up.  
      She follows him.

- C Then because they are medicine,  
they transform this little person into a calf.  
The little child of the buffalo possessed by the Crow has no buffalo father.  
"Mother,  
    where is my father?"  
        he asks.  
"You are an Indian,  
    your father is a Crow,"  
        she answers.
- "To my father let us go,  
    these calves are always mocking me."  
"That is right,"  
    she says.
- D She takes back her child,  
    looking for the Crow Indians.  
Then she sees the camp.  
This buffalo turns into a fine-looking Crow woman.  
Her child also is human.  
They are good looking.  
When the sun has gone down,  
    they reach the camp.  
Young men are walking about,  
    looking for his father.  
This young man has a friend,  
    they are coming out of a lodge.  
"Your father is in that last lodge,  
    that one is your father's.  
        Go,  
            take hold of him."
- E Then he takes hold of him.  
"Father,"  
    he says.  
"Yes,  
    son,"  
        he says.  
He takes him in his arms,  
    goes the other way and sits down with him.  
"Son,  
    how am I your father?"

He has no wife;  
still as before he is single.

"Son,  
how am I your father?"  
he asks.

"Don't move,"  
he says.

But the boy runs away to his mother and asks her,  
"Why is he my father?"

"When he asks,  
tell him this,  
    'My mother is a buffalo,  
            she was stuck in the mud,  
                    twice you possessed her.  
                            Then my mother was pregnant,  
                                    I was born,  
  thus I am your child."

The child told his father this.

"All right,  
    where is your mother?"

"That one sitting outside is she,"  
he says.

"Come on,  
    let us go to her,"  
    he says.

He takes hold of his father,  
    he takes him to her.

"Mother,  
    this is my father I am bringing here,"  
    he says.

"How is it you did not recognize your child?  
    Indians all recognize their children."

"Because I have no wife I did not recognize him."

"Did you not remember what happened in the mud?  
    'Wife,'  
        you said,"  
        she says.

This young man sits for awhile,  
    he recollects it.

"She is the buffalo I possessed,"  
he thinks.

"Wife,  
you said,"  
-- that recalls it.  
The woman is very good-looking.  
He goes into his lodge with her,  
and they get married.

F Then for a long time they remain among the Crow.  
The buffalo (wife) says to her husband,  
"Do not speak to me as follows.  
Do not mock me,  
do not say,  
'You are a ghost.'"  
Their child grows and goes out hunting with his arrows.  
The young man loves his wife and child.  
Then for some reason he says to her,  
"You are almost like a ghost."  
"Don't say that,"  
I said,  
now I shall go home,"  
she says.  
When he closes his eyes that night,  
she is gone.  
They go on the road,  
--on the near side their tracks are human,  
farther on they are those of buffalo.

G Then he follows their tracks.  
He comes to a great many buffalo.  
One of them comes up to him.  
"What do you want?"  
"I am looking for my wife and child,  
they came this way."  
The buffalo knew it.  
"Her father is staying here.  
Just now she goes over there on the other side with her child.  
There is a lodge there,  
she wants to reach it.  
Go there."

H Then when he climbs to the hill-top,  
he again meets a big buffalo.  
It comes and meets him.

"Bother-in-law,  
they again have gone to a lodge over there,  
just there over on the other side."

I He reaches the lodge.  
"I'll overtake them before they have got too far,"  
he thinks.  
Again he meets many buffalo.  
Again one of them comes up to him.  
"Brother-in-law,  
where do you come from?"  
"My wife and my child have come here,  
it is they for whom I am looking."  
"Just now they have gone over on the other side of that hill.  
Her father and her mother are there.  
She will not go away from there.  
Meet her there."  
They show him as he goes.  
They live in the farthest lodges.  
Like the Crow Indians they stay in lodges.

J The young man arrives.  
As he stands at the edge of the camp again a young man comes up.  
"Now,  
brother-in-law,  
where do you come from?"  
"My wife and my child have come here,  
I have come to them."  
"Don't move,  
I'll tell them."  
He goes.  
The young woman is seated.  
She has gotten to her father and mother.  
"Your husband is coming,  
he is sitting over there."  
Her mother talks to her.  
"Since you married a Crow for a while,  
why did you run away?"  
"He said what I told him not to say,  
that is why I came here."  
Her parents say,  
"He has come from afar,  
take him back."

She says to her child,

"Walk,

tell your father,

the women will sit down,

the children will sit down.

Then if he himself goes among the children and  
picks out you;

if he goes among the woman and picks out  
me,

then we'll go home with him."

This boy then tells his father.

"Father,

when the children sit down and they let you go there,

when you see me I shall move my right ear,

then pick me out.

When you go to the females,

I am going to tramp in the mud and with my foot  
shall trace it down her rump.

It will be muddy,

that will be she,

seize her.

If you go in the rear  
you will be able to  
tell."

K He passes in front of a great many buffalo.

He looks at their faces.

He does not recognize his wife.

He goes to the end of the line.

After a while he says,

"I shall go from behind."

"Very well,"

they say.

"If I do not recognize her,

then I cannot help myself."

Then he goes behind them.

A long time passes,

then he comes to a buffalo.

Mud is on her rump,

it is smooth.

He pushes the rump with his foot.

"This is my wife,  
stand up,  
come."

He stands there laughing.  
He comes with her and takes her to their child,  
who is sitting there.

"Let us go,"  
he says.

L They enter the lodge of wife's parents.  
Then they give them food,  
and he eats.  
Then he lies down.  
The next day they go home.  
Wherever his wife goes thereafter he goes with her.  
The Crow see that one has truly a buffalo wife.  
When buffalo breed,  
they are wont to walk with them,  
the Crow say.

Finally what they say we also say,  
"One who loves his wife,  
that one has truly a buffalo wife."

They stay among the Crow Indians;  
whether they died,  
we do not know.

When a young man their child marries among the Crow and stays with them.  
Beyond this I do not know.

***OVERVIEW: THE BUFFALO-WIFE***

Scene	Actors	Action	Setting	Theme
A	buffalo/ young man	seduction	muddy place	selfish/ desire
B	buffalo/ child	birth/ human	buffalo camp	orphaned:buffalo
C	buffalo/ child	transform/ calf	buffalo camp	orphaned:human
D	buffalo/ child/ helper	quest/ transform	Crow camp	quest
E	child/ father	quest/ union	Crow camp	quest/family
F	buffalo/ husband	breaks word/ family dissolved	Crow camp	disrespect/ orphaned
G/H/I	father/ helper	quest	buffalo camp	quest
J	father/ child(helper)	quest	buffalo camp	quest
K	father/ buffalo/ child	test	buffalo camp	quest/family
L	father/ wife/child	union	buffalo/human family camps	

## Discussion:

1. **two orphan quest motifs:** child is orphaned by father and quests, and father/husband is orphaned by wife/son and quests (human creates orphaned status--possesses buffalo and then disrespects wife)
  - next to trickster motif, most prevalent literary motif in Indian oral literature
  - combines elements of culture hero (journey and test) with animal parent literary motif
  - an impoverished child, alone, without parents or lacking in some significant attribute abused, bullied, adversary, taken advantage of
  - either seeks a vision or is visited by a spirit guardian
    - quest, journey
    - test, challenges
  - adopted by spirit guardian/animal parent
    - Buffalo, Eagle as father, as parent
  - returns, triumphant, overcoming orphaned status and subdues bully
  - **meanings:**
    - self:
      - quester, seeker, movement, but not assertive, is respectful of others
      - handicapped, impoverished, orphaned, something vital is missing
    - focus: individual, alone, (like trickster)
    - alone he quests (initially)
    - means: give of self in sacrifice, self-effacing, unselfish giving, offer up self
    - relations: reciprocity, exchange sought in a world of potential adversity and challenges, give in order to receive
    - consequence: may or may not succeed, but if he does, status as "self, alone abandoned, orphaned" is eliminated, adopted by new parent, no longer alone,
    - and transformed into strong, viable individual
  - **myth/ritual structural replication** (in vision quest, Sun Dance, initiation rituals, rites of passage):
    1. orphaned status: symbolically expressed as orphan, incomplete, alone in need of help
    2. quest and separation, and sacrifice:
      - a. enter liminal state, removed from ordinary, mundane, physically and spiritually cut off, symbolic journey
        - purification procedures: sweat bath, rub self with sage, smoking with incense of cedar

- site of fast: butte, hill, far away from ordinary human community/interactions
  - wall of rock, bed of sage
  - humble self, humility, as an ant
- or
- sickness, removed from normal, also a sacrifice, without food, not ordinary act
- = ritual death,
- a. separates and strips self from mundane existence and identity
  - b. renders self in void, nothing, empties, and receptive
  - c. renders what is most essential in self, the soul
- b. sacrifice if quest is successful, must have reciprocity, gift exchange between self and spirit world
- give of food/water
  - give sincerity
- = assume two active agents: giver and receiver

3. vision and adopted

- a. if gift judged worthy and accepted, a vision is rendered
  - transcends previous state of two active agents and become one, in union with ordinary time and space dissolved
  - and communicate with, learn spiritual truths and gain guidance as animal spirit appears and instructs
- b. vision establishes adoption relation, parent-child dyad
  - gain in spiritual kinship, with guidance and strength
  - rules of respect, taboos to honor associated with

4. affirmation and resolution: rebirth

after vision, return to secular world, redefining self in new, full status and maintaining linkage via medicine bundle and song

= orphan, death and liminality, adoption and rebirth

2. **transformation/medicine motif**: buffalo have medicine, transform selves and humans (where is medicine to be found)

3. **animal/human spouse motif**: extended kinship

4. **value of kinship/family** stressed throughout

5. use of "**four**" (four challenges and progressive "becomings" in the father/husband quest)

6. commentary of **wife**: when husband stays with, calls her a "buffalo" wife (what are the qualities associated with buffalo wife and why?)

**Text Source:**

Lowie, Robert. *Myths and Traditions of the Crow Indians*. Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, 15:117-119, 1918.