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What's in a Name?

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WWW.THINKSTOCK.COM, POPMARLEO

BY ROSALYN LAPIER

My grandmother, Annie Mad Plume Wall, named my daughters, Abaki and Iko'tsimiskimaki, when they were both babies. I wanted both of my daughters to have Blackfeet names in an effort to return and restore the Blackfeet language into everyday use. In the past, of course, it was common practice in Blackfeet society to name children when they were babies. However, today, since most Blackfeet give their children American names at birth, the practice of giving a "Blackfeet name" has changed. My parents named me Rosalyn at birth, but when I was a young child my grandmother also gave me her Blackfeet name, Otahkoisinopaki. And, like many Blackfeet names, all three of these names describe elements of the Blackfeet natural world.

A misconception exists regarding the names and naming of Native Americans. People often ask me, “Did your grandmother see something in nature and name you after it?” Many people believe that Native people named their children based on the first thing seen in nature after the baby was born, or on the child’s personality and its corresponding natural entity—the “Dances With Wolves” theory of naming. In reality, both the process of naming and the names themselves are far different from this popularly-held belief, and are complex to explain.

The Old Ways

In the past each Blackfeet person had only one unique name; the Blackfeet did not use family or surnames. Today it is difficult to imagine living in an entire community with hundreds to thousands of people, all with their own singular individual name. But it was their names that made the Blackfeet stand out individually within their strongly communal society.

The Blackfeet believed that children’s destinies and even their fates were determined by several factors, most importantly their names. Encoded within a child’s name was a relationship with both the supernatural world and a supernatural ally, the latter helping the child fulfill her own talents, abilities and calling in life. A

supernatural ally might be an animal, plant or other element that serves as an intermediary between the human world and the supernatural, speaking or negotiating on behalf of a person. For example, if it was snowing too much one would not directly ask the “Snow Maker” to make it snow less, he would instead ask his supernatural ally to speak to the “Snow Maker” on his behalf.

Names were given carefully by a prominent person selected by the family. Giving a name was considered both an honor and a responsibility. The giver of the name took the task seriously, often praying to his or her own supernatural ally, and taking time to contemplate carefully before providing the family with a name.

Most names carried with them a story of their origin, a relationship with a supernatural ally, sometimes a song or a prayer for the supernatural ally, perhaps supernatural power or ability, and, most importantly, supernatural protection for the child throughout his life. The Blackfeet did not believe in “luck” or approaching life in a haphazard way. They believed that life was lived with purpose and intention, was guided by the supernatural, and that the foundation for all this was found within one’s name.

Sacred Economy

The Blackfeet have a cultural concept that historian William Farr described as a “sacred economy.” Within this sacred economy the Blackfeet bought and sold objects both tangible and intangible that held supernatural power or an ally relationship. Living one’s life alone without supernatural assistance was considered unthinkable. There were, therefore, several processes in place for acquiring supernatural assistance. The most difficult and least sure method was to go and seek it on your own. The far more certain process was to purchase it from another, who could attest to its proven success.

Large tipis in the Blackfeet inner-circle, early 1900s. Image is a hand-colored glass lantern slide by Walter McClintock.



The Blackfeet considered names intangible objects that held supernatural power.

old days. The Blackfeet considered it tantamount to stealing if someone took a name without first paying its owner for it. Such an act was not only morally wrong but could potentially generate the ire of a supernatural ally.

The practice of naming differed based on gender and the age of the recipient. In the past, women typically owned only one name throughout their lives. This was in part because the Blackfeet viewed women as creators of life and as living closer to the supernatural world, thus not needing to seek out additional supernatural assistance. Sometimes women did receive another name, but this was often to observe a deed or honor.

The Blackfeet viewed men differently. Unlike women, men owned several names throughout their lives, hoping, with each new name, to acquire a closer relationship with the supernatural world. Men often had a childhood name, a name in their young adulthood, and so on, acquiring a new name each time they progressed through another stage of life. But even though a man might own several names throughout his lifetime, he only used one name at any one time.

The Blackfeet considered names intangible objects that held supernatural power. Therefore, in the past, when a family asked a prominent person to name their child, they paid the person. However, they did not pay the person for the honor of giving the name; they paid the person for the name itself and its related supernatural connection. Once a person owned a name, she could use it for as long as she saw fit and then sell it to another. The buying and selling of names, as objects of supernatural power in a sacred economy, was common practice in the

The New Ways

Names and naming changed at the turn of the 20th century. The federal government and religious groups on the Blackfeet reservation worked hard to assimilate Blackfeet into American culture. It was at this time, during my grandparents' childhood, that many Blackfeet adopted new American first names, usually Christian, and incorporated their Blackfeet names, translated into English, as their last names. At the turn of the last century, these unique individual names became the Blackfeet surnames (in their English translation) that you still hear today in Montana: Aimsback, Mad Plume, No Runner, Spotted Bear.

However, even with this attempted assimilation, the Blackfeet continued to name their children with Blackfeet names. Today, most Blackfeet have two names: their legal American name, with a first and last name, and their individual Blackfeet name.

Over the past century a new process for naming has emerged. To a certain extent, most modern Blackfeet acquire a name in the same way that the Blackfeet did in the past. Sometimes a family asks a prominent person in the community; however, more often an elder from within their own family gives a child a name. And families often respect the same protocols of the old days. When I was given my Blackfeet name as a child, my mother invited all the elders in our family, held a family feast and paid the elders for my name.

When I was a child, my grandmother named me Otahkoinopaki, or "Yellow Swift Fox Woman." Much later in life, my grandmother gave me a second name, Kitaiksisskstaki, or "Not Real Beaver Woman." My grandmother gave me this second name because I was the first grandchild in the family to go away to college and to graduate with a degree, and she considered this an honor for the family. My grandfather named my older brother Iòkimau, which is a shortened form of the word Ixtáìòkimau, or "To Make Pemmican." According to the old ways of the Blackfeet, my brother and I now "own" our individual names. In addition, in the future we are the only people who can "sell" them. The Blackfeet today consider names as carefully guarded family treasures or family heirlooms.

Return to Old Ways

There are some young Blackfeet, such as my daughters, who are returning to the old ways. Instead of going by an American

name, my daughters have gone by their Blackfeet names their entire lives, and their Blackfeet names are also their legal names. (However, by law they must also have a surname.) The meaning of their names is multifaceted and would take another article to explain fully, but I can provide a general understanding.

My eldest daughter's name, Abaki, translates as "Winter Weasel" or "White Weasel Woman." The Blackfeet valued natural entities that could change their appearance, and have always viewed the weasel (*Mustela erminea*), whose fur turns white in winter, as a special animal with supernatural ability, even incorporating the skins of the winter weasel into their clothing as religious icons. Since the Blackfeet did not leave anything to chance, they valued the weasel's ability to determine its own destiny and transform itself.

Annie Mad Plume Wall, the author's grandmother, with the author's daughter. Annie Mad Plume Wall gave her granddaughter the Blackfeet name Abaki, or "White Weasel Woman."



The Blackfeet today consider names as carefully guarded family treasures or family heirlooms.



"Salmon Colored Supernatural Fossilized Shell Woman," a name derived from a type of mussel (*Pyganodon grandis*) found in the Missouri River in Montana. Religious leaders used the shell of this mussel in their ceremonies. For example, if a young man wanted his sweetheart to fall in love with him, he could go to a religious leader, who would use the mussel shell to perform a ceremony which would change the feelings of the sweetheart. The Blackfeet valued the mussel's ability to change human nature or behavior.

So Blackfeet names are more than just a description of the natural world; they are a reflection of a deeper understanding of relationships between the supernatural and the natural. The Blackfeet left nothing to chance, including their names. In choosing names, they sought out relationships that could help alter, change or influence their daily lives. Blackfeet names are unique and carry with them a connection to that transformative world, as well as the power to influence a person's destiny, provide protection, and define a person's place in her family and her role in life. 🦦

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