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From the Natural to the Supernatural

Rosalyn LaPier

University of Montana - Missoula, rosalyn.lapier@mso.umt.edu

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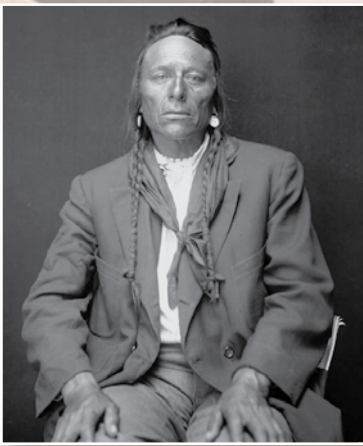


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Aims Back or, in the Piegan language, *PáyotayBkχkumei*, was what historian John C. Ewers called a “buffalo Indian.” To Ewers this meant someone who had grown into adulthood before the reservation era, when the Piegan still lived a nomadic lifestyle,

hunting buffalo and gathering plants on the prairies. Aims Back was born in a tipi sometime in the 1860s. He traveled by horseback, hunted buffalo, celebrated religious ceremonies and experienced freedom on the northern Great Plains before it was encumbered by boundaries, fences and roads.

By the late 19th century the buffalo were gone and these “buffalo Indians” were forced to adopt an alien lifestyle. They had to stop moving with the seasons and stay in one place. They relocated onto enclaves along rivers and creeks within the boundaries of the Blackfeet reservation. Aims Back and his wife Hollering in the Air, *Kayetsáχkumi*, moved to Blacktail creek on the south side of the reservation with other members of his Skunk band, or *A'pekai0ks*.

On the surface, Aims Back adapted to his new reality. By the beginning of the 20th century he had changed the clothing

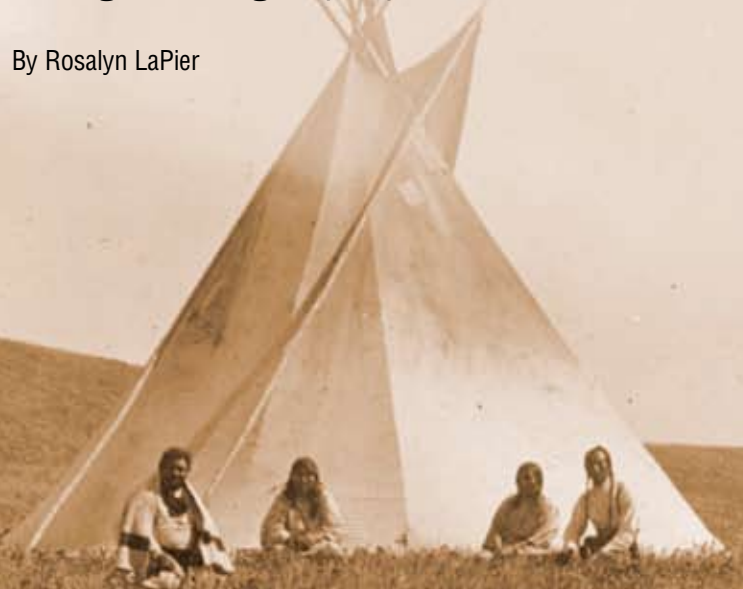
he wore, built a log cabin, dug a root cellar and established a small farm. Because he was unable to have children, he adopted his wife's son and a young boy, my grandfather, who he called *Aukema*. The Catholic Church even attempted to introduce him to a new way of understanding the universe.

Despite these outward vestiges of acculturation into modern American life, Aims Back's belief system had not changed. Aims Back believed that within the world around him – within the natural world – there existed both a visible and an invisible reality. He believed that within nature a person could find avenues to the supernatural world. With the help of the supernatural realm a person could live a long and abundant life. Even more, the Piegan believed that with the help of the supernatural they could alter or change their temporal world. If their horse ran too slowly, they could gain access to supernatural powers that would make their horse run

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Discovering the Piegan people's world view

By Rosalyn LaPier



faster. If they went out to pick berries, they could cause the supernatural to intercede in order to stop worms or bugs from eating the berries first.

The common characterization that Native Americans “lived in balance with nature” did not apply to the Piegan. Piegan people believed they could transform the natural world in a variety of ways with the help of the supernatural realm. And although a common misconception is that Native Americans found the supernatural everywhere in nature, the Piegan believed the supernatural dwelt only within specific places, or existed within certain plants, animals, rocks, shells, fossils and other natural elements.

Besides physical objects or places, intangible concepts also were believed to possess supernatural power. For instance, names, when properly conferred, provided a person with supernatural assistance and allowed individuals to live a long life. For this reason children’s names were chosen very carefully. Aims Back named his grandchildren based on his own personal interactions with the supernatural realm. He named his oldest grandchild “Holy Thunder Woman” after he was struck by Thunder and the Thunder spoke to him. The Thunder told him that she wanted Aims Back to live a long, wholesome life.

In the Piegan world view, specific objects could provide a person various protections from the human world. The supernatural power imbedded within an eagle headdress made a person impervious to injury inflicted by weapons. Aims Back went to a sacred place within Badger canyon (now within the Badger-Two Medicine area) to capture an eagle and make himself a headdress. One peer of Aims Back’s reported that his eagle headdress protected him from bullets and arrows and he escaped unharmed from several clashes.

For the Piegan specific designs painted on tipis, clothing or their bodies provided a person with specific abilities or protections. Tipi designs were not benign decorations. These designs possessed the supernatural power of the animal or object depicted. These designs usually were given to humans by the supernatural source itself. All tipi designs had an associated religious ritual. Most tipi designs incorporated the *einiskim*, or buffalo stone, and its ritual. The *einiskim* provided the owners of the tipi with the ability to change the behavior of buffalo, which made the owners more successful at hunting. Aims Back owned a tipi design known as the Big Rock tipi and an *einiskim* bundle most of his life.

In the Piegan belief system, the natural world was not something that an individual

had to adapt to, but instead nature was something that could be changed or altered with the help of the supernatural. Like Aims Back, most Piegan people owned a number of different supernatural objects throughout their lives. Whether they were tangible, such as a headdress, or intangible, such as a name or a painted design, the Piegan viewed them as essential to living their lives. Aims Back sought out a relationship with different elements of the supernatural and these forces helped him live a good life, protected him from harm and made him a successful hunter.

Aims Back was indeed a “buffalo Indian.” He believed in a different reality than the generations that came after him. He grew up on the prairies, following the buffalo, and he died on the reservation during World War II, as the U.S. entered the atomic age. He believed that a person had to strive to develop an intimate relationship with the natural world and its connection to the supernatural, and with this help one could live a good life. He named my mother, his third grandchild, *Sépistaki*, or Owl Woman, in honor of the owls that talked to him as he rode his horse along Blacktail creek. When they talked to him they reminded him of their long relationship with the Piegan, saying “we are the ones that take care of you.” 🦉

