

4. The Calendrical and Numerical Systems of the Nootka

The Nootka, a Native American tribe, were a fishing, hunting, and gathering type of people who resided in villages over a large area of the west coast of Vancouver Island. Juan Perez was the first person to encounter the Nootka, in 1774; James Cook was the second person to visit the region, in 1778. Actually it was from Cook's voyage – as well as some other voyages after him – that the West learned about the Nootkans' concept of time and how they counted.

Like many other Native American groups, the Nootkans were well aware of time based on days and seasons so that they could carry out specific daily tasks for survival. But they did not have a definite system for arranging chronological periods and seasons. Obviously, their concept of time is much different from European's; they did not have 30 or 31 days per month and 12 months per year. Instead the Nootkans divided time into moons, so they followed a lunar calendar.

The way that the Nootkans divided their various moons depended upon the weather and the availability of food, such as fish, whales, birds, fruits, roots, leaves, and flowers, so they could survive as fishermen, hunters, and gatherers. Moreover, their moon counts also depended upon such special features as religious festivals and whaling rituals.

In 1941 Robert Haswell became the first person to try to list various moons of the Yuquot Nootkans and match them with the twelve European months. Earlier, in 1913, Jose Marino Mozino showed how the Nootkans divided their year into fourteen months, each with twenty days. Additional days were frequently added to the end of each period depending upon characteristic features such as the availability of the fish. Generally, the chiefs of the groups decided when days should be added to any period and when the next period should begin. And basically the numbers of added days were different from period to period and from year to year. It was also said that the division of a day depended upon the sun and their simple daily routines such as the amount of food being collected. Meal times and rest periods were also adjusted to the demand of their food supply.

The Nootkans also had verbal terms for numbers, with distinct words for the numbers one to ten. The numbers eleven to nineteen were expressed as a combination of the unit numbers and ten. Twenty was twice ten, thirty was three times ten, etc. Therefore the Nootkans had a base-ten, additive number system.

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