

7. Tallies and the Ritual Use of Number in Ojibway Pictography

The Ojibway Tribe, an Algonkian speaking tribe that occupied the region around Lake Superior, utilized numbers to practice and record their rituals. The tribe recorded their customs through tally systems and pictography. Pictography is “any form of preliterate art—executed on any available surface—that is known, or it is assumed to have a communicative rather than a decorative or aesthetic intent” (p. 182). The Ojibway used a tally system to record census data. These records consisted of totemic signs which identified the head of the family and marks that indicated the number in the head’s family. The tally system was also used to create genealogical records. William W. Warren describes a copper plate that had eight deep indentations to indicate the past generations of the chief ancestors since their acquisition of the adjacent region (p. 183). The Ojibway tribe used both pictographs and tally marks when they created wooden grave markers. The grave markers had a reversed illustration of the clan symbol that signified death. Tally marks symbolized the number of important events in the deceased’s life. Some important events that were recorded were the number of war parties he led, the number of enemies he killed, and the number of eagles feathers he had acquired for bravery (p. 183).

The Ojibway transcribed their tribal traditions, origins, and lore through pictographs on sacred birch bark scrolls. Numerology’s influence in the traditions and culture of the Ojibway is displayed through the prevalent use of the number 4 and sequences of numbers with base 4 on these sacred scrolls. The importance of the number 4 stemmed from the tribe’s directional system, in which tribal ancestors “occupied four quarters of the earth – northeast, southeast, southwest, and northwest” (p. 188). The tribe believed that in a Great Medicine Spirit that was supported by four manitos, archetypal spirits of birds and animals, at each cardinal point.

Master scrolls demonstrated the importance of 4 to the tribe in three ways. First, they exhibited illustrations or symbols of four lodges. The latter symbolized the stages a candidate must pass through in order to become a full member of the tribe. In each lodge there is also the presence of four manitos. Sequences were displayed in the number of advisors in each lodge. The Master Scroll KP-1 fully demonstrates the importance of numerology in pictographs. In this scroll, four lodges are illustrated with four manitos, probably bears, in each lodge guarding the entrances. The order of the ceremony is illustrated by the sequences developed by the number of officials. In the first lodge there are 4 advisors, 8 in the second, 16 in the third and 36 in the last.

These ritualistic pieces demonstrate the Ojibway’s numerical system. They possessed a simple tally system to record important events of tribe members. The master scrolls demonstrate the progression of the tribe’s numerical system to contain multiplicative sequences.

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