

Haa (Acorn Dice Game)

Summary of Nisenan historical documentation

This document summarizes information about dice games played by the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians (SSBMI) Community's Nisenan Ancestors to support the SSBMI TEK and Language Department's efforts to revitalize dice game and other traditional games.

Throughout California, "half-shell" dice games were played mainly by women traditionally (e.g. DeBoer 2001:225-226). However, these games varied considerably in terms of what was used as dice (i.e. acorn meats versus walnut shells), how many dice were used (i.e. 4, 6, or 8), how dice were tossed (e.g. into a basket tray or from a basket tray onto another surface), how many counter sticks were used (e.g. 8 or 10), and how points were assigned (e.g. whether landing all four dice on the same side yields the thrower any points).

Our survey of published and archival materials, including accounts from some of the Tribe's relations, indicates that Nisenan people played a dice game called *haa* using four acorn dice made from the meats extracted from two halved acorns.

In the rest of this document, we present accounts of dice game from Nisenan sources and then summarize a typical Nisenan acorn dice game (Section 1). We share additional ethnographic accounts showing that neighboring Miwok people traditionally played a similar dice game using acorn dice. The use of walnut dice, on the other hand, appears to have been more typical of Yokuts people and other communities further south (Section 2). We conclude by summarizing available information on how to make acorn dice, sharing representative photographs of Miwok and Pomo acorn dice, and sharing some language for the TEK and Language Departments to use to play dice game (Section 3).

1. Accounts of dice game from Nisenan sources

Stephen Powers, who worked with Nisenan people in Auburn, Latrobe, and other areas in the mid-1870s and who was careful to distinguish Nisenan language and culture from those of the Maidu people living north of the Bear River and Miwok people living south of the Cosumnes River, recorded one of the earliest descriptions of the Nisenan dice game. Powers wrote that the game was played both by women and men using four acorn dice created by splitting two acorns lengthwise into halves (Powers 1877:332):

“The *ha* is a game of dice, played by men or women, two, three, or four together. The dice, four in number, consist of two acorns split lengthwise into halves, with the outsides scraped and painted red or black. They are shaken in the hands and thrown into a wide, flat basket, woven in ornamental patterns, sometimes worth \$25. One paint and three whites, or *vice versa*, score nothing; two of each, score one; four alike, score four. The thrower keeps throwing until he makes a blank throw, when another takes the dice. When all the players have stood their turn, the one who has scored the most takes the stakes, which in this game are generally small, say a ‘bit’.¹ As the Indians say, ‘This is a quick game, and with good luck one can very soon break another.’” (Powers 1877:332)

In the early 1900s, J. W. Hudson recorded an account of a dice game played with 4 half acorns by Nisenan people 12 miles south of Placerville (Hudson 1902; cited in Culin 1907):²

“Dr. J. W. Hudson describes a dice game, played with four half acorns cast into a basket, under the name of *ha*. *Te’-ō*, the dice plaque basket is often oval in shape. Two alike up or two alike down count 1; all alike up or down, 2.” (Culin 1907:155)

In 1904, C. Hart Merriam recorded words and partial information about a dice game from Charlie Hunchup, the captain of the village of K’ut’bá located between the North and Middle Forks of the Cosumnes River. Hunchup told Merriam that the game was played using “4 acorns, thrown into a shallow basket” and 10 counter sticks. Merriam recorded the name of the game and of the dice (both “Hah’”), the name of the counter sticks (“Hahm-chah”, literally ‘dice-game stick’), and the name of the basket which Merriam also recorded as the word for ‘meal tray’ (“Tā’-oo”) (Merriam 1904:34).

In 1929, Ralph L. Beals recorded a description of a dice game played using acorn dice:³

“*Acorn game*, *ha*·, primarily woman’s game; men sometimes play for amusement. Acorns thrown by hand on basketry tray. Winning throw: 2 up and 2 down, winner taking 1 tally stick. Dice passed to opponents after unsuccessful throw... Women played other men’s games, but this only one on which wagered.” (Beals 1933:354)

¹ A bit is an old form of currency equivalent to 12.5¢. One bit in 1875 would be worth approximately \$3.82 today (<https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1875?amount=0.13>; accessed August 19, 2025).

² Hudson worked with a Nisenan woman named Mrs. Franklin who lived ~1.5 miles upriver from Nashville and who provided these names for the dice game and the dice basket in 1902 (Hudson 1902:4). The SSBMI Language Department is currently working on obtaining high-resolution copies of Hudson’s fieldnotes and learning whether he worked with other Nisenan people while he was an active researcher in California starting in 1889 (<https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8r49q2q/>). It is not clear whether the account that Culin (1907) provides is based solely on what Hudson learned from Mrs. Franklin or other individuals.

³ Beals worked with William Joseph, Sam Kessler of Placerville, Andrew Jackson of Camino, Jim Dick and Jane Winn Lewis of Auburn, J. Porter of Forest Hill, Frank Suehead of Colfax, and Dick Childs & Dick Jaime of Nevada City. It is unclear whether he obtained this account from one person or if this is a composite account.

In a list of gambling words from a larger set of fieldnotes, William Joseph gave “hato” as the name for ‘acorn game’ (Freeland et al. n.d.). This word is made up of *haa* ‘acorn dice’ and *-to*, a suffix which occurs in words related to recreational pastimes like the generic word for ‘game, to play’ (*k’aato-*) and the word for ‘joy-walk, to take a walk’ (*ineeto-*).

Elsewhere, William Joseph said that *tew* and *ullit* are the baskets used to play acorn dice game (Uldall n.d.:5). William Joseph described *tew* as a flat basket for winnowing and sifting while *ullit* is a larger basket shaped like a pan and used as a dish and a measure for borrowed flour (Uldall & Shipley 1966).⁴

While discussing other types of games, Tom Cleanso, the brother of SSBMI Matriarch Pamela Cleanso Adams, told anthropologists that they “never played with walnut shells” (Gayton 1925). He did not mention other dice games to anthropologists, but it is likely that Nisenan people in the Sacramento Valley also played acorn dice game.

1.1 A typical Nisenan acorn dice game

In sum, Nisenan people traditionally played a dice game called *haa* using acorn dice. *Haa* was most often played by women, but men also played.

It was played with four dice, also called *haa*, made by splitting the meats of two acorns in half lengthwise. The outside of the dice may be left unpainted or “painted red or black” so that throws are assigned points based on whether the white or painted side faces up (cf. Powers 1877); most sources do not mention decorative elements.

Players take turns throwing the four split-acorn dice into a shallow basket (both *tew* and *ullit* were used) and taking points in the form of counter sticks called *haam c’aa* based on the result of their throw. However, accounts differ in terms of how points are assigned:

1. Two facing up and two down = 1 point (Beals 1933:354)
2. Two facing up and two down = 1 point; all four on the same side = 2 points (Culin 1907:155)
3. Two facing up and two down = 1 point; all four on the same side = 4 points (Powers 1877:332)

⁴ SSBMI Matriarch Pamela Cleanso Adams and Ida Hill Starkey used the same word for a flat, coiled circular winnower (Merriam 1905/1936:22). Some sources wrote this word as though it has two syllables, like Merriam (“Tā’-oo” or “Tā’-o”) or Hudson via Culin (“Te’-ö”), but it has one syllable: Those sources were constrained by the writing systems they were using to transcribe Nisenan words, which did not have a way to write syllables ending in *-ew*, and so they had to render this as a sequence of two vowels.

Similarly, both sources write the word *sew* ‘river’, which has one syllable, as though it has two syllables.

A player continues throwing dice until they make an unsuccessful throw, i.e. resulting in one facing up and three facing down or vice versa, at which point they pass the dice to the other player. Again, accounts of the game differ as to when and how the game ends:

1. After each player has made one unsuccessful throw (Powers 1877:332), or
2. (Presumably) After the ten counter sticks have been awarded (Merriam 1904)

Such variation in how points are assigned and when the game ends is common in Native dice games played across North America (DeBoer 2001), and it is possible too that there is not one canonical scoring method but that players would agree to the scoring rules before each game.

2. Accounts of dice games from neighboring communities

The use of acorn dice is not unique to Nisenan people; neighboring Miwok people have also played a dice game using acorn dice. For example, a Northern Sierra Miwok speaker from Oleta (now called “Fiddletown”) told Merriam that they played a dice game using 4 split-acorn dice and 8 counter sticks (Merriam n.d.). Eph Cummings likewise said that they gambled with “4 or 6 acorns” at West Point (Merriam 1905). Similarly, a Central Sierra Miwok speaker from Murphys & Angels told Merriam that they played a dice game using 6 split-acorn dice (Merriam 1902) and Hudson recorded accounts of a dice game played with 6 split-acorn dice from Central Sierra Miwok people living in Tuolumne County and from Southern Sierra Miwok people living in Mariposa County (Culin 1907:143-144).

Barrett and Gifford mention that Miwok people play dice game with split-acorn dice, split-walnut dice, or cylinders of wood. However, their account covers all Miwok people living in the Sierra Nevada, stretching from the Middle Fork of the Cosumnes River in the north to as far south as Yosemite, and they do not elaborate on where each type of dice was used. They do reference one set of acorn dice made by a Northern Sierra Miwok person as well as a set of Pomo dice (1933; see the Pomo dice in Appendix 2 of this document).

Judging from DeBoer’s survey of dice games in North America, walnut dice appear to be more typical further south. They cite various Yokuts peoples as using either acorn dice or walnut dice, and walnut dice seem more typical into southern California (2001:256-257).

3. Discussion

The TEK Department has expressed interest in learning how to make acorn dice. While anthropological sources did not record much information about how acorn dice are made, nor about which acorns are preferred for making dice, we can share some information:

- You remove the cap from an acorn and split the acorn in half lengthwise.
- You extract the halved meat of the acorn and discard the shell.
- You can scrape and paint the outside, but since acorn meats are used rather than shells you do not fill acorn dice with asphaltum and abalone shell (unlike walnut dice; DeBoer 2001:225).

We have not yet found photographs of acorn dice that were made by Nisenan people. Appendices 1 & 2 show sets of acorn dice made by Miwok and Pomo people, respectively.

The TEK and Language Departments want to start using Nisenan language while playing dice game. Here is some associated vocabulary, written in the SSBMI Nisenan alphabet:

<i>haa</i>	‘dice game’
<i>haa</i>	‘acorn dice’
<i>haam c’aa</i>	‘counter sticks (for dice game)’
<i>tew</i>	‘gambling tray, winnowing tray basket’

For additional Nisenan language for playing *haa*, please visit our dice game language webpage: <https://bit.ly/ssbmi-dice-game>, or email us at Language@ssband.org.

References

- Barrett, S. A., and E. W. Gifford. 1933. Miwok material culture: Indian life of the Yosemite region. Bulletin of Milwaukee Public Museum 2. Milwaukee, WI: Cannon Printing Company.
- Beals, Ralph L. 1933. Ethnology of the Nisenan. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 31:335-414.
- Culin, Stewart. 1907. Games of the North American Indians. In the Twenty-fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology. Washington: Government Printing Office.
https://archive.org/details/twentyfourthannu0000unse_v4d4/.
- DeBoer, Warren R. 2001. Of dice and women: Gambling and exchange in Native North America. Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory 8:215-268. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20177442>.
- Freeland, L. S., et al. n.d. Unpublished field notes from a 1919 field methods class at UC Berkeley. In [Miscellaneous notes on Maidu grammar]. Uldall.004.020. Survey of California and Other Indian Languages. University of California, Berkeley. <http://cla.berkeley.edu/item/1785>.
- Gayton, Anna H. 1925. [Southern Nisenan ethnographic notes and vocabularies], book IV. Unpublished field notes. BANC FILM 2216: 120.4.1. The Bancroft Library. University of California, Berkeley. <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt1199q7hq/>.
- Hudson, J. W. 1902. Unpublished fieldnotes. Manuscript in possession of the SSBMI Language Department. [Original copies may be found at the John W. Hudson papers, Sonoma State University Library. <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8r49q2q/>].
- Merriam, C. Hart. n.d. Unpublished field notes. Box 28 ("Northern Me'-wuk (Oleta)" folder). MSS32698. C. Hart Merriam Papers. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. <https://lccn.loc.gov/mm82032698>.
- Merriam, C. Hart. 1902. Unpublished field notes. Box 28 ("Middle Mewuk Tuolumne Mew'-wah" folder). MSS32698. C. Hart Merriam Papers. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. <https://lccn.loc.gov/mm82032698>.
- Merriam, C. Hart. 1904. Unpublished field notes. Box 31 ("Nis-se-nan' - Southern" folder). MSS32698. C. Hart Merriam Papers. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. <https://lccn.loc.gov/mm82032698>.
- Merriam, C. Hart. 1905. Unpublished field notes. Box 28. ("Northern Mu'-wah Me'-wuk (Calaveras County)" folder). MSS32698. C. Hart Merriam Papers. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. <https://lccn.loc.gov/mm82032698>.
- Merriam, C. Hart. 1905/1936. Unpublished field notes. Box 31. "No-to'-mus-se & Es'-tom Nis'-se-non" folder). MSS32698. C. Hart Merriam Papers. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. <https://lccn.loc.gov/mm82032698>.
- Powers, Stephen. 1877. Tribes of California. Washington: Government Printing Office.
- Uldall, Hans J., and William Shipley. 1966. Nisenan texts and dictionary. University of California Publications in Linguistics. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Uldall, Hans J. (n.d.). [Nisenan vocabulary], Uldall.007.001, in "Hans Jørgen Uldall Papers on the Nisenan Language", California Language Archive, Survey of California and Other Indian Languages, University of California, Berkeley, <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.7297/X25M63MW>.

Appendix 1 - Set of Northern Sierra Miwok acorn dice

Dice are currently housed at the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology at UC Berkeley.
More information available at: <https://n2t.net/ark:/21549/hm21010010035>



Appendix 1 - Set of Northern Sierra Miwok acorn dice (continued)

Dice are currently housed at the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology at UC Berkeley.
More information available at: <https://n2t.net/ark:/21549/hm21010010035>



Appendix 2 - Set of Pomo acorn dice

Shown in 7 and 8, and said to be representative of Miwok dice. Published in Barrett and Gifford (1933). Items 1-3 are acorn buzzers (item 1 is Sinkyone, item 2 is Pomo, and item 3 is Miwok). Items 4-6 are Miwok acorn tops.

