

time & Basho's calendar

Don't confuse Basho's naturally grounded calendar with the more *disconnected* one in general international use today. The lunar system of Basho's time starts the year with the moon roughly midway between winter solstice & spring equinox; treats equinoxes & solstices as seasonal *mid*-points; and maintains harmonic relations between the natural (i.e., ecological), astronomical & cultural years. Months & "moons" become the same thing again, with full moon always on the 15th.

Whether given in descriptive names (e.g., "seed-sprouting moon") or by number (e.g., "3rd moon"), months more or less coincide with what's actually happening in nature (e.g., seeds sprouting) or in relation to the universe (e.g., closest approach of two stars to each other, on the 7th day of the 7th moon, Tanabata festival). Cultural events form around this calendar, so the festival of peaches happens more or less when peach-trees are in bloom, a natural time to celebrate girls & bring dolls out for a party also.

With the moon-numbers so intimately connected with seasonal progress (& day-numbers also regular within each lunar cycle), a numerical consistency developed in the festival calendar, with special holidays on the 1st day of 1st moon (New Year's), 3rd day of 3rd moon (Girl's, Doll's &/or Peach), 5th day of 5th moon (Boys or Carp), 7th day of 7th moon (Tanabata, or Star-crossed Lovers Night), for example, each celebrated in Basho's progression of place-time sketches.

There is a natural arc in Basho's journey through time, as well as through the geography. In both cases, he starts at one point on the map/calendar (while recapping his prior return in time for New Year's house-cleaning), heads north at the cusp of spring & summer, makes a little loop before taking the Mogami west on the fullness of summer rains (following the blazing sun to the sea), makes another little loop before turning south in autumn's chill, ends while stepping in a boat.

Parallel to the geographical journey, he takes us through both natural seasons and cultural year, marked by festivals & moon-bound folk traditions. At the end, he's still moving on, heading off toward a higher order festival, the rededication rites at Ise. In current calendar terms, his arc takes him from mid-May to late October, a journey made in synch with sun & moon, as specified at the start. Along the way, he times his passages for conjunctions—to meet the full moon at Matsushima, for example—conscious of the sun, his place in the arc of the year & life's journey....

Basho's connection with the natural botanical & astronomical worlds may be lost by readers when the old lunar-calendar dates are mistranslated to the far more arbitrary days & months currently in vogue, out of synch with what's actually happening. Such confusion has even affected some otherwise scholarly mis-translators, as well as people in general.

The widespread adoption of a calendar that starts on the arbitrary date "January 1" & considers solstices & equinoxes as seasonal start-&-end points instead of mid-points gets even more confusing by completely divorcing months from actual moons, so we can get two full moons in a single month (an etymological inconsistency). In place of relationship with natural cycles of earth and universe, this calendar imposes arbitrary mental constructs no longer connected to anything actual, organizing time around arcane gods and emperors—as honored in names like January, March, July, August. Never mind the present calendar's quite dramatic internal inconsistency--so that numerically based September, October, November and December, named from Latin roots for 7th, 8th, 9th, & 10th, respectively, now appear as the 9th, 10th, 11th & 12th months instead!

The biggest confusion among modern Basho readers (& non-readers alike) may be how Japan's old *festival* calendar was mistranslated onto the "new" by mechanical grafting, i.e., numerical transposition, in many cases simply moving the original day/moon numbers of the former to the

same day/month numbers on the latter, making the 3rd day of the 3rd moon March 3, for example, despite the resulting disconnection with the actual seasonal time originally commemorated (whether vegetative cycle or astronomical event). A star festival, originally celebrating a particular heavenly conjunction ends up under different stars, with similarly disjointed relations to the planet's seasonal cycles, everything out of touch with root meanings in the cultural-natural transmission.

This is no small matter in appreciating Basho's journey, for such a pilgrimage is itself the poet's expressed way of seeking harmony with such larger aspects of our being as resonance with the land, the deep roots of culture, earth with its matrix of life, the galaxy splashed over Sado Island. Reading Basho's *Inner Trails*, one makes a journey of reconnection, re-tuning the psyche with natural cycles and contexts, as Basho himself does, artistic & personal pilgrimages one.

In the process, we leave not only the Gregorian calendar behind, but its world view (however unconscious), its *way* of looking at time, along with its propensity to cut up the world into mechanically regular units. For Basho, time is organic, alive, deeply layered, and connected to planetary motions. The essence of his poetry emerges from the conjunction of time, place, and consciousness. He plays all the strings of his instrument to celebrate time, the moment and the passage, the present and its history, both multiply layered with cultural associations.

Still, time remains a great mystery and source of deep attention, rooted in elemental things like land, country, history, planet, the actual heavens in harmony with sacred cycles (as when a shrine is due to be rededicated, for example), along with the irregular cycles of life and death. Time is no abstract mental construct to Basho, in other words, but something always linked on multiple levels with place and consciousness. Basho's journey-book takes its substance, its breath, and its shape out of just such intersections—time-place-&-consciousness; poets of the past, Basho, & readers of the future.