Dakota Sioux

"Dakota" comes from a Siouan dialect spoken by the eastern group of the tribe commonly referred to as Sioux. The divisions of the eastern group include Sissetons ("swamp village," "lake village," or "fish-scale village"), Wahpetons ("dwellers among the leaves"), Wahpekutes ("shooters among the leaves"), and Mdewakantons ("People of the Mystic Lake"). The latter two divisions are also known as Santees (from *Isanati*, "knife") and shared a closely related culture.

The Dakota Sioux refer to themselves as *Dakota* ("ally"), *Dakotah Oyate* ("Dakota People"), or *Ikce Wicasa* ("Natural" or "Free People"). The word "Sioux" is derived originally from an Ojibwa word *Nadowe-is-iw*, meaning "lesser adder" ("enemy" is the implication), which was corrupted by French voyageurs to *Nadoussioux* and then shortened to "Sioux." Today, many people use the term "Dakota" or, less commonly, "Lakota" to refer to all Sioux people.

All 13 subdivisions of Dakota-Lakota-Nakota speakers (Sioux) were known as Oceti Sakowin, or Seven Council Fires, a term referring to their seven political divisions: Teton (the western group, speakers of Lakota); Sisseton, Wahpeton, Wahpekute, and Mdewakanton (the eastern group, speakers of Dakota); and Yankton and Yanktonai (the central, or Wiciyela, group, speakers of Dakota and Nakota). In the late 17th century, the Dakotas lived in Wisconsin and north central Minnesota, around Mille Lacs. By the 19th century they had migrated to the prairies and the eastern plains of Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, and eastern South Dakota.

Male and female shamans provided religious leadership. Depending on the tribe, their duties might include leading hunting and war parties; curing the sick; foretelling the future, including the weather; and interpreting visions and dreams. Sissetons and Wahpetons believed in Wakan Tanka, the Great Spirit and creator of the universe, as well as other gods and spirits. The secret Wahpeton Medicine Lodge Society performed the Medicine Dance several times a year. Other religious activities included vision quests and ritual purification in the sweat lodge. The Sissetons later adopted some Plains ceremonies, such as the Sun Dance.

All but the Wahpekutes were divided into seven bands, each usually led by a chief. For the same three bands, the *akitcita* was an elite warrior group that maintained discipline at camp and on the hunt. This police society was distinctive of Siouans and may have originated with them. The Seven Council Fires met approximately annually to socialize and discuss matters of national importance.

Mdewakantons wrapped their dead in skins or blankets and placed them on scaffolds. Remains were taken to tribal burial grounds after a few months or years and buried in mounds with tools and weapons. Sissetons treated their dead similarly but included tools, weapons, and utensils. Bodies were placed in scaffolds or trees, with their heads facing south. Wahpetons buried their dead early on but changed to scaffolds, probably as a result of Sisseton influence. The Dakota bands may once have been clans. Favorite games, usually accompanied by gambling, included lacrosse and shinny (a variation of hockey). Descent was patrilineal.

Dakotas built small, occasionally palisaded villages near lakes and rice swamps when they lived in the Wisconsin-Minnesota area. At that time they lived in large, heavily timbered bark houses with pitched roofs. In the winter, some groups lived in small conical houses covered with skins. Both men and women helped build the houses. The

Sisseton sometimes used teepees after their move to the prairies.

Siouan people in the Ohio Valley farmed corn, beans, and squash. People also ate turtles, fish, dogs, and large and small game and gathered wild rice. Buffalo, which roamed the area in small herds, was also an important food source. People burned grass around the range and forced the buffalo toward an ambush. The Sissetons, especially, turned more toward buffalo hunting with their westward migration. Bows and arrows were the main hunting weapons. The Sissetons carved pipestone (catlinite) ceremonial pipes and wove rushes into mats. The Wahpeton wove rushes into mats and also wove cedar and basswood fiber bags. All groups made pottery.

Depending on time and location, Dakota tribes traded various Woodlands, prairie, and Plains goods. Items included wild rice, pottery, and skins and other animal products. The Dakotas made fine painted rawhide trunks. They incised and painted parfleches, pipe pouches, robes, and other items. Women tended to make geometric designs, whereas men made more realistic forms. Clothing was embroidered and, later, beaded. The Sissetons made dugout canoes, and the Wahpetons made birchbark canoes. Most groups obtained horses beginning around 1760, but the eastern groups never had as many as did the western groups.

Most clothing was made from buckskin. In the Woodlands, the people wore breechclouts, dresses, leggings, and moccasins, with fur robes for extra warmth. On the Plains, they decorated their clothing with beads and quillwork in geometric and animal designs. The idea that the purpose of war was to bring glory to an individual rather than to acquire territory or destroy an enemy people was distinctive to the Siouan people and may have originated with them. Dakotas did not generally fight other Dakotas. The *akitcita* were known particularly among the Mdewakantons.

The Siouan linguistic family may have originated along the lower Mississippi River or in eastern Texas. Siouan speakers moved to, or may in fact have originated in, the Ohio Valley, where they lived in large agricultural settlements. They may have been related to the Mound Builder culture of the ninth through 12th centuries. They may also have originated in the upper Mississippi Valley or even the Atlantic seaboard. Siouan tribes living in the Southeast, between Florida and Virginia, around the late 16th and early 17th centuries, were destroyed either by attacks from Algonquin-speaking Indians or a combination of attacks from non-Indians and non-Indian diseases.

Dakota-Lakota-Nakota speakers ranged throughout more than 100 million acres of the upper Mississippi region, including Minnesota and parts of Wisconsin, Iowa, and the Dakotas, from the 16th to the early 17th century. Some of these people encountered French explorers around Mille Lacs, Minnesota, in the late 17th century, and Santees were directly involved in the great British-French political and economic struggle. Around that time, conflict with the Crees and Anishinabes, who were well armed with French rifles, plus the lure of great buffalo herds to feed their expanding population, induced bands to begin moving west into the Plains. The people acquired horses around the mid-18th century. Dakotas were the last to leave, with most bands remaining in the prairies of western Minnesota and eastern South Dakota.

Dakotas ceded all land in Minnesota and Iowa in 1837 and 1851 (Mendota and Traverse des Sioux Treaties), except for a reservation along the Minnesota River. Santees were served by a lower agency, near Morton, and Sissetons and Wahpetons by an upper agency, near Granite Falls. At the mercy of dishonest agents and government officials, who cheated them out of food and money, and all but overrun by squatters, the Santees rebelled in 1862. Under the leadership of Ta-oya-te-duta (Little Crow), they killed hundreds of non-Indians.

Inasmuch as many Wahpetons and Sissetons remained neutral (or, as in the case of Chief Wabasha, betrayed their people), and support for the rebellion was not deep, it shortly collapsed. In reprisal, the government hanged 38 Dakotas after President Abraham Lincoln pardoned over 250 others and confiscated all Dakota land and property in Minnesota. All previous treaties were unilaterally abrogated. Little Crow himself was killed by bounty hunters in 1863.

His scalp and skull were placed on exhibition in St. Paul.

Many Santees fled to Canada and to the West, to join relatives at Fort Peck and elsewhere. Many more died of starvation and illness during this period. Mdewakanton and Wahpekute survivors were rounded up and finally settled at Crow Creek, South Dakota, a place of poor soil and little game, where hundreds of removed Dakotas died in one year. Thus ended the long Santee occupation of the Eastern Woodlands/prairie region.

In 1866, Santees at Crow Creek were removed to the Santee Reservation, Nebraska, where living conditions were extremely poor. Most of the land was allotted in 1885. Missionaries, especially Congregationalists and Episcopalians, were influential well into the 20th century. Most people lived by subsistence farming, hunting, fishing, and gathering.

Two reservations were established for Wahpetons and Sissetons around 1867: the Sisseton-Wahpeton Reservation, near Lake Traverse, South Dakota, and the Fort Totten Reservation, at Devil's Lake. By 1892, two-thirds of the Lake Traverse Reservation had been opened to non-Indians, with the remaining one-third, about 300,000 acres, allotted to individuals. In order not to starve, many sold their allotted land, so that more than half of the latter acreage was subsequently lost. For much of the early 20th century, people eked out a living through subsistence farming combined with other subsistence activities as well as wages and trust fund payments.

Several hundred Dakotas left the Santee Reservation in 1869 to settle on the Big Sioux River near Flandreau, South Dakota, renouncing tribal membership at that time. Some federal aid was arranged by a Presbyterian minister, but by and large these people lived without even the meager benefits provided to most Indians. Some Flandreau Indians eventually drifted back to form communities in Minnesota.

Further Reading

Hicks, John D. *The Federal Union: A History of the United States to 1865*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1937; Moquin, Wayne. *Great Documents in American Indian History*. New York: Praeger, 1973; Pritzker, Barry M. *Native America Today: A Guide to Community Politics and Culture*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1999.