

Lakota Sioux

"Lakota" is a name in a Siouan dialect spoken by the western or Teton (Titunwan, "prairie dwellers") group of the tribe commonly referred to as Sioux. The subdivisions of the western group include Oglalas ("they scatter their own"), Sicangus ("burned thighs," also known by the French name Brûlé), Hunkpapas ("end village"), Minneconjous ("plant beside the stream"), Itazipcos ("no bows," also known by the French name Sans Arcs), Sihasapas ("black feet"), and O'ohenonpas ("two kettles").



The Lakota Sioux refer to themselves as *Lakota* ("ally"), as *Lakotah Oyate* ("Lakota People"), or as *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) that was corrupted by French voyageurs to *Nadousssioux* 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: Tetons (the western group, speakers of Lakota); Sissetons, Wahpetons, Wahpukutes, and Mdewakantons (the eastern group, speakers of Dakota); and Yanktons and Yanktonais (the central, or Wiciyela, group, speakers of Dakota and Nakota).



According to legend, White Buffalo Calf Pipe Woman brought the people seven ceremonies: the Sweat Lodge (*Inipi*), Making of Relatives (*Hunka*), Vision Quest (*Hanbleceya*), Girls' Puberty Ritual (*Isnati alowanpi*), Throwing of the Ball (*Tapa wankayeyapi*), Keeping of the Soul (*Wakicagapi*), and the Sun Dance (*Wiwanyang wacipi*).

Given originally by a legendary personage, the Sacred Pipe is a symbol of the vitality of the nation and its relationship with the creative forces of the universe. Pipes, carried by members of a special society, were used in peace ceremonies and to ?sanctify? decisions and agreements.

Shamans, or medicine people (men or women), were healers and curers as well as interpreters of visions. They also found lost objects, divined the future, and provided important leadership during war or hunts. They received their powers from especially powerful guardian spirits and had a particularly close relationship with all of the deities. They were especially familiar with all legends, symbols, rituals, ceremonies, and cosmology.

A guardian spirit, usually in the guise of an animal, appeared to people on a vision quest, which was a period of self-deprivation in a remote place, or perhaps in a dream. Spirits were associated with particular songs, prayers, and symbols that, properly used, could bring the individual luck, skills, and/or protection from evil or danger. Women as well as men sought visions. Personal medicine bundles were made up of objects dictated by the guardian spirit during the vision quest.

Shamans also led the Sun Dance, the most important of Plains ceremonies after about the mid-18th century, when the horse transformed Plains dwellers into full-time nomadic buffalo hunters. Among the Lakotas the Sun Dance

brought together their most important beliefs about themselves and the universe. Wakan Tanka, or the Great Spirit, as the supreme creator of the universe, or the sacred hoop, was first among 16 gods representing the forces of nature. The number four was particularly sacred to the Lakota, representing the four cardinal directions, the pantheon of gods (four groups of four), and the four stages of life. The highly symbolic, 12-day-long Sun Dance brought benefits both to the participants and to the nation as a whole. Individually sponsored as the result of a vow taken the previous winter, the dance itself contained elements of dancing, feasting, praying, fasting, and self-torture.

Elected chiefs in the Woodlands gave way to leadership by warriors. The subdivisions became more autonomous and divided into bands and their basic units. These were known as *tiyospaye*, a group of fluid composition composed of relatives and led by a warrior chief. Each had its own recognized hunting area. Chiefs were older men who had distinguished themselves in hunting and battle and were noted for their wisdom, well-spokenness, and generosity. Each band also had a council of such men, who governed without any force to back them up except the respect engendered by their position and a consensus-style decision making.

In the later historical period, the Oglalas had a society composed of older men, who elected seven lifelong chiefs. In practice, authority was delegated to four highly respected "shirt wearers," who also served for life. There were also four *wakikun*, or camp police, who were temporary officials assisted by the members of the *akitcita*.

The seven Teton divisions met regularly, ideally annually in the summer, from at least the late 18th century to about 1850. At these times there was a Sun Dance, and people socialized and generally renewed acquaintances. A supreme council of four chiefs met to discuss national policies. Still, the nation was very decentralized, with no overall political or military coordination, and the supreme council's power was largely symbolic.

On the Plains, patrilineal clans gave way to bilaterally descended extended families. Generosity was highly valued, as were bravery, fortitude, wisdom, and fidelity. In the giveaway custom, people shared generously, especially with the less able or fortunate and during important times in their lives. Thus did people achieve prestige while actually reducing individual suffering and want. Social control was effected mostly by peer pressure and ridicule, although serious crimes were punished by revenge and/or adjudication by the council. Various voluntary societies included those for men (mostly war related); feast and dance societies (which included social groups of both sexes and groups for women only); dream cult societies (such as the Heyoka, or clown, society); and craft societies. Games included various guessing games, cup-and-ball, and competitions. Adult games were usually accompanied by gambling. Toys included conical tops and sleds. In general, storytelling was a favorite pastime.

Marriage was mainly a matter of parental agreement, often based on the couple's choice, and divorce was common and easy to obtain. Fidelity in marriage was an ideal, and a disloyal woman might have the end of her nose cut off. Children, especially boys, were always welcomed. Infants were allowed to nurse on demand. Children were treated with love and affection and were rarely struck. Boys and girls (except for brothers and sisters) generally played together until puberty. Games revolved around future adult activities.

During menstruation, girls and women were secluded for a few days, as men considered them dangerous. Girls having their first period were seen only by women and instructed on proper womanly behavior. Several weeks later, fathers who were able gave a ceremony, presided over by a shaman, for their daughters. The relative lavishness of the ceremony reflected on the whole family. Girls who had reached puberty were considered marriageable.

Boys did not have a specific puberty ceremony. Their vision quests, first successful buffalo hunt, first war party, and so forth might be marked by feasts and gifts and were considered rites of passage. Men generally married slightly older than did women, having first to prove their manhood and perhaps acquire enough goods to distribute.

As a matter of respect there was no verbal communication between a man and his mother-in-law. Aged people were generally accorded a great deal of respect. When people reached what they considered to be the end of their functional lives, they might elect to remain behind the migrating band, although sometimes this action was taken involuntarily.

In the Woodlands, Lakotas lived in pole-frame lodges covered with woven mats or bark. Once on the Plains, they shifted to conical buffalo skin teepees in both the summer and the winter. The average teepee was made of about 12 buffalo skins, dressed and sewn together by women and placed over a pole framework. A teepee held one family. The interior fire was slightly off center. Two skin flaps at the top, attached to long poles, regulated the smoke hole. A small, elevated doorway was covered by a rawhide door.

Large and small game, wild rice, maple sugar, and fish constituted the bulk of the Woodland diet. On the Plains, people mostly ate buffalo. No part of the animal went to waste. The communal hunt, which was often but not always very successful, was accomplished by fire surrounds, shooting with bow and arrow, clubbing, or driving the animals off cliffs. Men also hunted individually or in family groups.

Lakotas also ate antelope, deer, and other large and small game as well as birds, eggs, turtles, tortoises, and fish. Young dog, considered a delicacy, was often eaten at feast times. Women gathered foods such as wild potatoes and turnips, berries, chokecherries, cactus, acorns, and wild onions. Some Teton women occasionally planted a little maize. There were also many medicinal herbs and plants.

Women tanned skins using elk antler scrapers with an attached stone (or iron) blade; the hair was either left on or soaked and scraped off. Rawhide was often used to attach items to each other, such as clubs and mauls. People made willow back rests for use in teepees. Lakotas traded at Arikara villages, north of the mouth of the Grand River, in present-day South Dakota, until about 1800, when they completely subjugated the Arikaras. They acted as intermediaries for the catlinite (red pipestone) trade between the Yanktons and most northern Plains tribes. Part of an extensive trade complex stretching throughout the West, the Tetons traded buffalo products to the eastern Dakotas for non-Indian goods the latter had obtained through the fur trade.

Art was integral to all Lakota materialism. Winter counts were pictographs on hides that recorded annual events. Clothing and bags were decorated with painting and porcupine quillwork, later bead-work. Bags, robes, and teepees were also painted. Designs were either realistic (generally painting, often made by men) or geometrical (generally quillwork and beadwork, often made by women). Musical instruments included flageolets, rattles, rasps, and drums.

Lakotas used birchbark and dugout canoes and snowshoes in the Woodlands. On the Plains, dogs served as the first beast of burden; the original migrations of the 17th and early 18th centuries were accomplished with the aid of dogs pulling travois. They still played a role in transportation even after the Lakotas acquired horses during the mid-18th century, probably from the Arikaras. Tetons became extremely skilled riders, and horse travois carried teepees and other goods.

Men wore deerskin or elk skin breechclouts, leggings, and soft sole moccasins. They braided their hair, and they often wore face and body paint. Some wore their hair in a roach. In the winter, women wore long elk skin dresses, knee-length leggings, and moccasins. They braided and parted their hair in the middle. They also wore face paint and earrings. Both sexes wore buffalo hide robes. Some of this clothing was discarded in the summer.

Plains clothing often was fringed and decorated with colorful beadwork, especially in the later historical period and for ceremonial purposes. People made ornaments of bone, dentalium shell, elk and grizzly bear teeth, beads, copper and obsidian, and perhaps turquoise.

From about the mid-19th century on, certain war leaders wore long eagle-feathered war bonnets for ceremonial purposes, although even before that period young men wore eagle feathers in their hair to signify achievements in battle. Chiefs and other people of authority also often wore special clothing and other paraphernalia at official occasions.

Tetons were feared fighters but did not fight each other. The *akitcita* was an elite warrior society that kept order in camp and especially on the hunt. Severe penalties were meted out to those who disrupted the summer hunt.

Warfare and raiding were the primary means to gain prestige. Military societies had their own songs, paraphernalia (such as feathered headgear), and ceremonies. War leaders, generally young men, had absolute authority but only over the war party while on a sortie. War and raiding parties were completely voluntary, motivated mainly by the desire to attain prestige. Men generally engaged in ritual purification in the sweat lodge before battle. Large battles involving hundreds of warriors occurred only in the late historical period.

As practiced in the early 19th century, counting coup meant achieving bravery in a hand-to-hand encounter with the enemy or some other feat of daring such as stealing a horse within a village. Killing and scalping generally merited less honor than did counting coup, although, in the 19th century, scalping was important to the Lakotas for ritualistic purposes.

Dakota-Lakota-Nakota speakers inhabited over 100 million acres, mostly prairie, in the upper Mississippi region, including Minnesota and parts of Wisconsin, Iowa, and the Dakotas, in the 16th to early 17th centuries. They largely kept clear of the British-French struggles. 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 onto the Plains in the mid-17th century. The Teton migration may have begun in the late 17th century, in the form of extended hunting parties into the James River basin.

Lakotas acquired horses around 1740; shortly after that time the first Teton bands crossed the Missouri River. They entered the Black Hills region around 1775, ultimately displacing the Cheyennes and Kiowas, and made it their spiritual center. As more and more Teton bands became Plains dwellers (almost all by 1830), they helped establish the classic Plains culture, which featured highly organized bands, almost complete dependence on the buffalo, and the central role of raiding and fighting. The Tetons became subdivided into their seven bands during that time.

In 1792, by defeating the Arikara Confederacy, the Lakotas were able to expand into the Missouri Valley and western South Dakota. In 1814 they concluded a treaty with the Kiowas, marking boundaries between the two peoples, including recognition that the Lakotas controlled the Black Hills (known to them as *Paha Sapa*). By that time, at the latest, the Lakotas were well armed with rifles.

Around 1822, the Lakotas joined with the Cheyennes to drive the Crows out of eastern Wyoming north of the Platte. During that period, the Tetons were engaged in supplying furs for non-Indians, although contacts were usually limited to trading posts, particularly Fort Laramie after 1834. In the 1840s, wagon trains passing through Teton territory began disrupting the buffalo herds, and the Indians began attacking the wagons. In the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty, the Indians agreed to give the wagons free access in exchange for official recognition of Indian territory.

Conflict continued throughout the 1850s. In one series of incidents, in which a group of Sicangus ate and offered to pay for a stray Mormon cow, the U.S. Army attacked Sicangu villages and killed over a hundred people. In the early to mid-1860s, the Oglala Chief Red Cloud (Makhpiya-luta) led and ultimately won a brutal and protracted fight to force the United States to close the Bozeman Road through the Powder River country, the last great hunting ground

of the Lakotas. The 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty was an admission by the United States of the Indian victory in the so-called Red Cloud's War. The government agreed to close the Bozeman Road and stay out of Teton territory. In exchange, the Indians agreed to stop their raids and remain on a Great Sioux Reservation. Both Red Cloud and the Sicangu leader Spotted Tail remained committed to peace, although they often spoke against easy accommodation to U.S. terms.

In 1874, gold was discovered in the Black Hills during an illegal military expedition. This event brought swarms of miners and other non-Indians in direct violation of the treaty. With Red Cloud and Spotted Tail settled on reservations, it fell to new leaders, young and free, such as the medicine man Sitting Bull (Tatanka Yotanka) and Crazy Horse (Tashunka Witco), to protect the sacred and legally recognized Teton lands against invasion. The United States rebuffed all Indian protests, and the Indians rejected U.S. efforts to purchase the Black Hills.

In 1876, Army units ceased protecting the Black Hills against non-Indian interlopers and went after Teton bands who refused to settle (which they were under no obligation to do under the terms of the Fort Laramie Treaty). In March, Tetons under Crazy Horse repelled an attack led by Colonel Joseph Reynolds. At Rosebud Creek the following June, Crazy Horse and his people routed a large force of soldiers as well as Crow and Shoshone scouts under the command of General George Crook. Later that month, Teton and Cheyenne Indians, led by Oglalas under Crazy Horse and Hunkpapas under Sitting Bull and Gall, wiped out the U.S. Seventh Cavalry under General George Custer at the Little Bighorn River.

Here the Indian victories came to an end. The Army defeated a large force of Cheyennes in July, and in September General Crook's soldiers captured a combined force of Oglalas and Minneconjous under American Horse. Two months later, Dull Knife and his northern Cheyennes lost an important battle, and Crazy Horse himself was defeated in January 1877 by General Nelson Miles. Finally, Miles defeated Lame Deer's Minneconjou band in May 1877. Meanwhile, Sitting Bull, tired of the military harassment, had taken his people north to Canada. With his people tired and starving, Crazy Horse surrendered in April 1877. In August he was placed under arrest and was assassinated on September 5. He is still regarded as a symbol of the Lakotas' heroic resistance and as their greatest leader.

Defeated militarily and under threat of mass removal to the Indian Territory, Red Cloud, Spotted Tail, and the other Lakota and Santee chiefs signed the treaty ceding the Black Hills and the Powder River country. Shortly thereafter, the Army confiscated all Lakota weapons and horses and then drove the people into exile to reservations along the Missouri River.

After unilateral "cessions" in 1877, the Great Sioux Reservation consisted of 35,000 square miles of land, but a coalition of non-Indians, including railroad promoters and land speculators, maneuvered to break up this parcel. Meanwhile, Canada proved completely inhospitable to the exiled Lakotas, and gradually they began drifting back to the United States. Sitting Bull returned to surrender formally in 1881.

The giant landgrab came in 1888, when the United States proposed to carve the great reservation up into six smaller ones, leaving about 9 million acres open for non-Indian settlement. The government unsuccessfully offered the Lakotas 50 cents an acre for the land. They then offered \$1.50 an acre and prepared to move unilaterally if the offer was rejected. The government needed three-quarters of the adult male votes for approval. Despite the opposition of Red Cloud, about half of the Oglalas signed the treaty. With Spotted Tail dead (assassinated in 1881), most of the Sicangus signed. Sitting Bull was the loudest voice opposed, but he was physically restrained from attending a meeting presided over by accommodationist chiefs, and the signatures were collected. The Great Sioux Reservation was no more.

Deprived of their livelihood, Lakotas quickly became dependent on inadequate and irregular U.S. rations. The United

States also undermined traditional leadership and created their own subservient power structure. A crisis ensued in 1889 when the government cut off all rations. The general confusion provided fertile ground for the Ghost Dance.

Fearing that the Ghost Dance would encourage a new Indian militancy and solidarity, white officials banned the practice. In defiance, Oglala leaders in 1890 planned a large gathering on the Pine Ridge Reservation. To keep Sitting Bull, the last strong Lakota leader, from attending, the Indian police arrested him in December. During the arrest he was shot and killed.

The Minneconjou leader Big Foot once supported the dance, and for this reason General Miles ordered his arrest. Big Foot led his band of about 350 people to Pine Ridge to join Red Cloud and others who advocated peace with the United States. The Army intercepted him along the way and ordered him to stop at Wounded Knee Creek. The next morning (December 29) the soldiers moved in to disarm the Indians. When a rifle accidentally fired into the air, the soldiers opened fire with the four Hotchkiss cannons on the bluffs overlooking the camp, killing between 260 and 300 Indians, mostly women and children. The Wounded Knee Massacre marked the symbolic end of large-scale Native American armed resistance in the United States.

From the 1880s into the 1950s, most Lakota children were forced to attend mission or Bureau of Indian Affairs schools. There the children were taught menial skills, and their culture was violently repressed. During the 20th century, teepees slowly gave way to government-issued tents and then log cabins. Many Lakotas became Catholics or Episcopalians, although traditional customs and religious practices also continued, including the officially banned Sun Dance.

Bands were broken up, in part by the allotment process. As the United States worked to replace traditional leadership, education, religion, and other cultural and political structures, Lakota society underwent a profound demoralization. Most Lakotas were fed government-issued beef, which they had trouble eating after a steady diet of buffalo. In general, government rations were of low quality and quantity.

Lakotas were ordered to begin raising cattle. Despite some success in the early 20th century, U.S. agents encouraged them in 1917 to sell their herds and lease their lands to non-Indians. When the lessees defaulted in 1921, the government urged Indians to sell their allotments for cash. By the 1930s, devoid of cattle and land, general destitution had set in.

Lakotas adopted the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934, after which reservations were governed by an elected tribal council, although the traditional system of chief-led *tiyospayes* (subbands) was still in place. A tribal court system handled minor problems; more serious offenses fell under the control of the U.S. court system.

Further Reading

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