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Lakhóta

“With this sacred pipe you will walk upon the Earth”

Long before humans were born, different powers, spirits, and creatures fought for dominion over the world. Once the four winds, each with its own task, were born, the directions and most important powers of the world were set. Eventually these creatures grew tired of each other and sent *Iktómi* (Trickster) to find people. Humans lived underground together with the buffalo in a state of chaos but *Iktómi* lured them to come to the earth's surface. The people and the buffalo emerged from beneath the earth together. That is why the people were called *Pté oyáte*, the Buffalo people. From there originated the seven fires of the Lakota people.

In the beginning, there was disharmony between humans, animals, and nonhuman elements. Then the White Buffalo Woman (*Ptesáŋwiŋ/Wóh̄pe*) came to resolve the conflict and to establish a relationship between humans and nonhumans. The sacred woman took a bundle from her back and said: “Behold this and always love it! It is *líla wakh̄áŋ* [very sacred] (...) With this you will send your voices to *Wakh̄áŋ Th̄áŋka*, your Father and Grandfather.” Then she took from the bundle a pipe and said:

With this sacred pipe you will walk upon the Earth (...) All the things of the universe, are joined to you who smoke the pipe – and all send their voices to *Wakh̄áŋ Th̄áŋka*, the Great Spirit.

The woman told them about the sacred ceremonies and how to walk the sacred red road and lead a good life. When she brought the Lakotas the sacred buffalo calf pipe, *ptehín̄čala čhaŋnún̄pa*, she gave them the foundation of their culture and religious ceremonies.

Lakhóta Th̄amákhoče – Lakota Country

For a century, the Lakotas with their close relatives, the Dakotas, Yanktons, and Yanktonais had been living east of the Missouri River. By the early 18th century, living space east of the river was getting scarce. Increasing numbers of people, white and Indian, were moving west. The exact year the Lakotas crossed the Missouri is not known, but they arrived on the Plains in small, independent groups. According to Lakota legends, “the people made winter camps at Ble Wakan (Sacred Lake),

but then some wandered so far in the summertime that they did not return to the winter camp. These people made their winter camp (...) upon the tinte [*thíŋta*] or plains.” Lakota winter counts (annual calendars) also describe a division of the people around the mid-18th century.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the Lakotas started to acquire guns and horses, and they established themselves as the major power on the Plains, expanding their domain to the Black Hills and beyond. They pushed aside the Kiowa, Arikara, and Crow tribes. By 1825, the Lakotas occupied an area stretching from the Missouri River to the Black Hills and from the Platte River to the Yellowstone River. Hunting buffalo provided the Lakotas with their primary means of living. The acquisition of horses allowed them to hunt more efficiently, resulting in a higher living standard and an increase in population. Disease wreaked havoc among the Lakotas, but because they lived in small groups, constantly on the move, they were less vulnerable to epidemics than the (semi-)sedentary tribes living in larger towns. Lakota population growth was rapid: in 1804 the whites estimated that there were 3,000 Lakotas, but in 1850 the number ranged 13,000-14,000.

For the Lakotas, measuring their numbers had no real significance. They knew they were numerous, their tribes and bands were independent, and they were becoming the most powerful people on the Northern Plains. They had found a new homeland, *Lakǎóta thámákǎoche*.

The Structure of *Lakǎóta Oyáte*

The 19th century Sioux society was very flexible, and it was constantly changing. Several divisions constitute what is called the Sioux Nation in English, and the Lakotas are the western division of the Sioux people. The name Sioux is a French corruption of the Ojibwe word Nadowessiwak, “little snakes.” Traditionally scholars divided the Sioux into the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota nations or divisions as follows: the *Lakǎotas*, or Tetons, were the western branch with seven tribes, Oglala (*Oglála*), Brulé (*Sičhánǵu*), Hunkpapa (*Húnkpaphaya*), Minneconjou (*Mnikǎówožu*), Two Kettle (*Oóhenunpa*), Blackfeet (*Sihásapa*), and Sans Arc (*Itázipčo*). The last five were known as *Saóne* in the early 19th century, but they separated into distinctive social units. The *Dakǎóta* or Santee (*Isányathi*) were divided into the Sisseton (*Sisíthunwan*), Mdewakanton (*Bdewákǎnthunwan*), Wahpeton (*Wahpéthunwan*) and Wahpekute (*Wahpékute*), and the *Nakǎóta* comprised of the Yankton (*Ihánkthunwan*) and Yanktonai (*Ihánkthunwanna*) people. Modern analysis, based on anthropological and linguistic research, demonstrates that the people whose self-designation is *Nakǎóta* are actually not Sioux, but the closely related Assiniboine and

Stoney people, living in Montana and Canada. The Santees/Sissetons are Eastern Dakotas and the Yanktons/Yanktonais are Western Dakotas.

The main unifying elements for these independent groups are common culture, history, and language, each of the divisions representing major dialects of the same language. In fact, their own name, whether spelled *Lakhóta*, *Dakhóta* or *Nakhóta*, means “allies.” For the Lakotas, all people speaking the same language were allies, *lakhólkičhiyapi*, and were related, *wólakhóta*. Together they comprised the sacred hoop, *čhaŋgléška wakhán*, which represents the unity of the people. All non-Lakota Native Americans were left outside the Lakota sacred hoop and were related as enemies, *thókakičhiyapi*. The whites were not originally included in the same category as Indians, and thus were not regarded as enemies. Instead they were called *wašiču*, a term that initially referred to special guardian spirits, often related to war.

The Lakotas are also known by the name Teton, deriving from the Lakota word *thithūŋway* (meaning perhaps “dwellers on the plains”). The Lakotas refer to their seven original tribes as *Očhéthi Šakówiŋ*, Seven Council Fires. Although the seven Lakota tribes have been the same, the number of bands belonging to these larger units has changed over time. The most significant societal unit was the *thiyóšpaye*, the extended family or lodge group. The *thiyóšpaye* was formed around a leader or chief, *ithájčhaŋ*, and could have up to 100-150 people, who were considered relatives. The smallest unit was the immediate family, *thiwáhe*. The *thiyóšpaye* and *thiwáhe* are gateways to kinship networks, which are at the core of Lakota society. Nineteenth-century Lakota society may be conceptualized as a great circle composed of many *thiyóšpayes* that varied in size, each led by a chief appointed by a council of elder decision makers. Band membership was a matter of choice and residence, not necessarily of descent. Each *thiyóšpaye* had its own identity, dialect, and corporate economic activity. The bonds that united the members of a *thiyóšpaye* were based on shared natural substance, blood, residence, volition, and common identity.

A rare Lakota source for understanding the early 19th century Oglala tribal is a winter count ledger book kept by the family of the famous chief American Horse (*Wašiču Thašúŋka*). Its detailed description of the Oglala tribal circle in 1825 gives us a glimpse of how the entire Lakota nation may have been structured early in the 19th century. While we do not have such a detailed description from other Lakota *oyátes*, it is possible to piece together enough information to say that similar structures were already in place among the other Lakota *oyátes*, at least by the 1820s. The winter count details seven Oglala bands in 1825. Each consisted of several smaller sub-bands

and *thiyóšpayes*. Over the years some of these groups split into new social units, or merged, but many bands were central in the Oglala camp circle throughout the 19th century and remain prominent today.

Lakota 18th century winter counts describe battles with traditional enemies, but they also depict trade. Relationships with whites were evidently peaceful, since the winter counts mostly refer to peaceful parleys or trading. Despite these amicable feelings, the unforeseen consequences of the *wašiču* presence were at times acutely felt and articulated in winter counts. Terrible epidemics ravaged neighboring tribes and the Lakotas. The No Ears winter count for 1782, for example, simply states “*nawičhašli*,” measles.

The 19th century saw the Lakotas transforming into a nomadic Plains Indian tribe, always on the move, ready to adapt and prepared to assert their power over other tribes. To be able to freely and more efficiently hunt the buffalo, they needed to expand. Thus, warfare became an essential part of Lakota life also from an economic standpoint. While warfare was very individualistic, success in war being the most important route to prestige and status, it needs to be understood in a wider economic and political framework. While intertribal warfare may seem random at first glance, the Lakota expansion and rise to dominance on the Northern Plains was much more. As a testimony to the Lakota expansionist way of thinking Oglala chief Black Hawk said in 1854, “. . .) we whipped these nations [Kiwias and Crows] out of the way, and in this we did what the white men do when they want the land of the Indians”. This comment shows that the Lakotas were not living in isolation nor were they unaware of what was going on around them. They knew the whites were hungry for land, and they used that as an argument to justify their own expansion.

Sometimes historians have romanticized Indian warfare, undermining its political and economic impact. While touching a living enemy was honorable and an integral part of Plains Indian warfare, warriors aimed to cause maximum destruction. Lakota aggression against the Pawnees was so severe that the Pawnees were on the brink of extinction. Indeed, according to Pawnee sources, the Lakotas were attempting to “wipe them out.”

The camp circle, *hočóka*, symbolizes the unity of the Lakota. Inside, the sacred circle (*čhangleška wakhán*) was untouchable. In the middle of the circle was the great soldiers’ or council lodge, *thiyóthipi*, where the main meetings were held. Around the actual circle, the Hunkpapas would always be located on either side of the “doorway” *hunkpá*. Then other tribes in the order of

importance would set up their tipis around the circle. The camp itself was called *wičóthi*, “the place where people live.” Depending on the situation, leadership transferred from the leader of a single *thiyóšpaye* to men’s warrior societies (*akíčhita okhólakičiyē*), or during war, to the war chief (*blotáhuŋka*). During large gatherings, when many tribes convened within one camp circle, the council of chiefs (*načá omníčiyē*), consisting of esteemed older men, had the highest decision-making power. The council selected men to carry out various tasks in the camp and on hunting or war raids, and advisors (*wakíčhuŋza*), who served as links between chiefs and the people and guided the camp’s moves. Other important leaders chosen by the council were the shirt wearers or “praiseworthy men” (*wičhášayatapika*). They were younger men who had succeeded in war and hunting. They were highly esteemed and were expected to serve their people with strict discipline and immaculate behavior. The leaders were collectively known as the “leading men,” *wičháša ithánčan*. Thus, the Lakotas never had only one chief who could independently make decisions. Power and authority were divided between individuals and groups.

Membership in a society was important. Some of the societies were established for social purposes. Men would sing, dance, and tell stories of war or hunting. Women’s societies involved crafts, singing or dancing. They were more informal than men’s societies, but they too gave women the opportunity to compete in different skills. Warrior societies, on the other hand, were more solemn communities. Membership was based on merit, and not everyone could join. Visions entitled membership in a particular society, and connected people with *Wakhánj*.

Wakháŋpi - The Sacred In many ways, prayer was the basis of all Lakota ceremonies, enabling humans to relate to nonhumans and was associated with the pipe (*čhannúnpa*). The Lakota word for prayer is *wáčhékiya*, that means both “to call on someone for aid” and “to address someone using a kin term.” Prayer was conceptualized and interpreted in terms of kinship. It was an invocation of relationship, often accompanied by cries, tears, and sacrifices of objects or of physical suffering.

The sun dance (*wiwányang wáčhípi*) was the most important collective calendrical ritual of the Lakota. Originally a warrior’s ceremony to obtain power over enemies, it also functioned as a prayer for abundance and increase of both the people and the buffalo. The sun dance was a compound ritual, as many other lesser rites were performed in association with it, as well as more social events such as feasting, dancing, and courtship. Aside from the pipe offering ceremony, the

most basic Lakota ceremony was the sweatlodge or *inikažapi* (freely translated as “life renewal”). It is a purification ceremony but also the preliminary of and conclusion to all other ceremonies. It is held in a low, dome-shaped lodge, typically constructed of willows and covered with hides. The ceremony of vision seeking (*haṅbléčheyapi*) was a ritual means to learn one’s path in life and to learn the will of the spirits in relation to one’s self or community. The hunka (*hunká*) was a ritual adoption ceremony. The buffalo sing (*thátháŋka lowáŋpi*), sometimes referred to as the *išnáthi awičhalowanpi* (preparing a girl for womanhood), was the women’s puberty or coming-of-age ceremony. The spirit-keeping ceremony (*wanági yuhápi*) was performed upon the death of a relative, often a child, and was a means of delaying the departure of the spirit (*wanági*) to the spirit world. The *wičháša wakháŋ*, holy men, served as mediators between the human and non-human worlds. The *pěžúta wičháša* and *waphíya* were the medicine men, curers or healers, who focused on curing people with, for example, herbal medicines with the help of their individual power. Then there were the true *wičháša wakháŋ*, the holy men, who had the knowledge of the sacred, who spoke the sacred language (*haṅblóglaka*), and who were the masters of ceremonies. Some women too received visions through which they became *wíŋyaŋ wakháŋ*, holy women, or medicine women, *pěžúta wíŋyaŋ*.

Among the Lakota, past and present, all forms of ritual are intertwined with kinship and despite government efforts to destroy these ceremonies, they are still practiced on all Lakota reservations.

Touching the Pen

By the year 1800, the Lakotas had been in contact with the whites for nearly two centuries, but only at this point do the whites get more attention in Lakota winter counts. The winter count kept by Oglala Long Soldier records a remarkable event for 1799-1800, which he calls the coming of “the First white man ever seen, who used iron” winter.

While the whites were important for the Lakotas as trading partners during the first two decades of the 19th century, other Indians continued to be their main enemies. Lakota winter counts depict scenes of minor battles where one or two people were killed, but also major events destroying entire enemy villages. The Pawnees and Arikaras were truly suffering from Lakota

aggression- A rare peace was attempted with the Kiowas in 1814-15, but it never materialized as one Lakota got frustrated during the talks and drew his hatchet into a Kiowa's head.

Lakota relations with the whites were about to change. In 1825 the United States sent an expedition to make treaties with the Plains tribes along the Missouri. For the Lakotas, especially the Oglalas and Brulés, it signified another opportunity to engage in trading. However, not all Lakotas were in agreement. The Hunkpapa of the north favored the Canadian traders and viewed Americans with contempt. Signing the 1825 treaty did not change much for the Lakota. Life continued as it had done for decades. The Lakotas were still expanding their domain to the west, fighting the traditional enemies, and trading with the whites.

Lakota-white relations were put to the first serious test at the end of the 1840s. The whites had opened the Oregon Trail through the southern Lakota hunting grounds from the Missouri River to Oregon and California. To secure the passage of the travelers, the first soldiers broke into Lakota territory in the Platte River valley in 1845. They bought several bases from the American Fur Company, which had a wide trading post network. The most famous of these trading posts is Fort Laramie in Southeastern Wyoming, bought in 1849. Fort Laramie quickly became the main military base of the southern Lakota lands, although it also kept its place as a center of trade.

In response to the ever-increasing flow of travelers, the Oglalas and Brulés decided to inform the US Government of their discontent and the problems the Oregon Trail was causing. In an unprecedented effort, sixteen chiefs wrote a letter to the President. They complained that "For several years past the Emigrants going over the Mountains from the United States, have been the Cause that Buffaloe have in a great measure left our hunting grounds, thereby Causing us to go into the Country of our enemies to hunt, exposing our lives daily for the necessary Subsistence of our wives & children and getting killed on several occasions – We have all along treated the Emigrants in the most friendly manner, giving them a free passage through our hunting grounds." This letter is significant. It is the first known letter that expresses Lakota points of view on the treaty signing process, but also on white encroachment on their lands. The Lakotas clearly state that they had nothing against the whites travelling through their country as long as they would oblige to the treaty signed in 1825. In Lakota society the right way to compensate damage caused to another person or group was to settle the losses with ample provisions, whether in horses or other goods. Here the Lakotas ask the US government to do the same.

The Lakotas were now in a new situation; the expansion of the United States was affecting their way of life. The letter above was one way of seeking mutual, peaceful interaction, but in the end the Lakotas had to make difficult and often divisive choices in their attitude and actions vis-a-vis the United States. The letter also shows that the Lakotas were quick to adapt to changing circumstances, embracing a *wašíču* way of communication, letter writing. Through this letter, they wanted to inform the United States of their problems, but also to demonstrate that they were an equal power and negotiating partner. In 1851 the United States government invited Indians to Fort Laramie to negotiate a permanent peace on the northern Plains. The need for the council has often been interpreted as a one-way deal; the US government pushing for a treaty and calling all the shots, the Indians agreeing just for the possibility of receiving presents. The presents were important, but to reduce Lakota agency to mere blankets and pots is naive. The Lakotas, too, had an agenda. The declining buffalo herds and growing numbers of travelers did not go unnoticed, and this was not what they had agreed upon in the 1825 treaty. The situation was unbearable, and something had to be done about it. On September 1, 1851 more than 10,000 Indians were ready to meet the US representatives at Horse Creek. The proceedings were not easy to arrange, and it took three weeks before the treaty was signed. Of those three weeks, only eight days were spent in actual talks, the rest were spent in various feasts, games, horse races, and ceremonies. The Lakotas were surprised that the US was not only going to pay the presents as a compensation for the violation of the 1825 treaty, but also wanted them to adhere to some new borders. That did not make sense to the Lakotas. They were used to following the buffalo wherever they wanted. Oglala Black Hawk emphasized that drawing borders and lines was not what they wanted. "You have split the country and I do not like it. What we live upon we hunt for, and we hunt from the Platte to the Arkansas, and from here to the Red But[t]e and the Sweet Water." For him these lands belonged to the Lakotas, and there was no reason to restrict their right to hunt where they pleased. While the Lakotas never accepted the new borders, a treaty was signed between the United States and the representatives of the various Northern Plains tribes. The council culminated in a magnificent display of presents delivered by the United States to the Indians. The *wakpámni thánka* or great distribution pleased the Lakotas and other Indians; many of their demands were met and they finally got their reward for the violations of the 1825 treaty. When the great distribution was over, the tribes dispersed to their respective hunting grounds, or territories that were supposedly assigned to them by the new treaty. In the aftermath of the Treaty of 1851 the

Lakotas made peace with the Crows. This seems to have been a genuine effort by both sides to solve constant raiding. It allowed both tribes to hunt and utilize the game rich area West of the Black Hills and along the Powder River and Belle Fourche Rivers. This area became a “neutral” buffer zone that benefitted both parties; the Lakotas got access to the buffalo herds and the Crows had easier access to trading posts as far south as the North Platte River west of Fort Laramie. From that perspective the US government hope for an end to intertribal warfare may have worked; it probably did not end altogether but may have quieted down to a certain degree. What followed though, was divisiveness among the Lakotas as to how to react to the *wašíču* encroachment, which ultimately led to major divisions between and within various Lakota *oyátes*, and set the scene for the major battles for the decades to follow.

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