

# WHO ARE THE LAKOTA?

## Geography

The Great Plains encompasses an area of over two million square kilometers (approx. 772,204 square miles) between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. This vast expanse of rolling grassland lies largely west of 96 degrees west longitude and between 32 and 52 degrees north latitude. Extending north from the Rio Grande, the Great Plains region stretches 2,300 km (1,429 mi) to the Saskatchewan River in southern Canada.



### Cloud Shield 1825-26

*Many of the Dakotas were drowned in a flood caused by a rise in the Missouri River, in a bend of which they camped.*

The curved line is the bend in the river; the waved line is the water, above which the tops of the *tipis* are shown.

### Major Geographical Landmarks Noted in the Winter Counts

(Try to locate each on the map shown.)

- Bad River
- Black Hills
- Cheyenne River
- Grand River
- Little Missouri River
- Missouri River
- Moreau River
- Platte River
- White River

## Climate

The climate on the Great Plains is typically extreme, with hot temperatures in the summer months and bitter cold weather in the winter. Precipitation is usually scant but can be severe and unpredictable. Before being confined to reservations, the Lakota spent summers on the open plains hunting buffalo. When the weather grew colder, the Lakota would seek protection from the frigid winds of the plains, moving their camps to more protected, wooded areas.



### Rosebud 1788-89

*Winter the Crows Froze*

Winter count keepers sometimes chose to remember the year using events relating to unusual weather occurrences.



### American Horse 1823-24

*They had an abundance of corn, which they got at a Ree village.*

The Ree, one of the farming tribes of the Great Plains region, are often associated with images of corn.

## Plants and Animals

Vegetation on the Great Plains was limited to a variety of perennial grasses with trees growing only along stream valleys and other water-rich environments. During much of the time period recorded in the winter counts, the Lakota were **nomadic**, following the buffalo herds for food. They did not grow crops, but gathered various edible roots, berries and other vegetation to supplement their diets. The Lakota also traded with neighboring farming tribes for food to eat.

### Flame 1837-38



*Many elk and deer killed.*

Both the Flame and Swan Counts record a prosperous hunting trip during this time period.

In addition to buffalo the Lakota also hunted deer, elk and antelope. Fish appear in the winter counts only in the earliest years before horses allowed the Lakota to hunt buffalo more successfully than before. Other animals native to the Great Plains and documented in the winter counts are beavers, wildcats, bears, wolves and coyotes.

## Society

At the time of the Sioux migration to the Great Plains, the people were grouped into seven major divisions. Together, they formed the “Seven Council Fires,” called *oceti sakowin*. Each year, the seven divisions would come together to celebrate sacred ceremonial events. The Lakota belonged to the largest of these groups—the *Titunwan*, or Teton Sioux. Located in the western-most Sioux territory, they spoke a common dialect and had somewhat different customs than their Dakota relatives.

The *Titunwan* are grouped into seven *oyate* (tribes): *Mniconjou*, *Oglala*, *Sicangu* (Brulé), *Hunkpapa*, *Sihasapa* (Blackfeet), *O’ohenumpa* (Two Kettle) and *Itazipco* (Sans Arc or No Bows). Each *oyate* was further divided into extended family groups, called *tiospayes*. A typical *tiospaye* was comprised of a man, his brothers and/or male cousins and their families who travelled together year-round. Together, each *tiospaye* numbered 150-300 people total.

## Camp Circle of the Seven Council Fires

When the Sioux set up a formal camp, each division was arranged around a circle, with the entrance to the camp always facing east, toward the rising sun.

### Middle Sioux (Dakota)

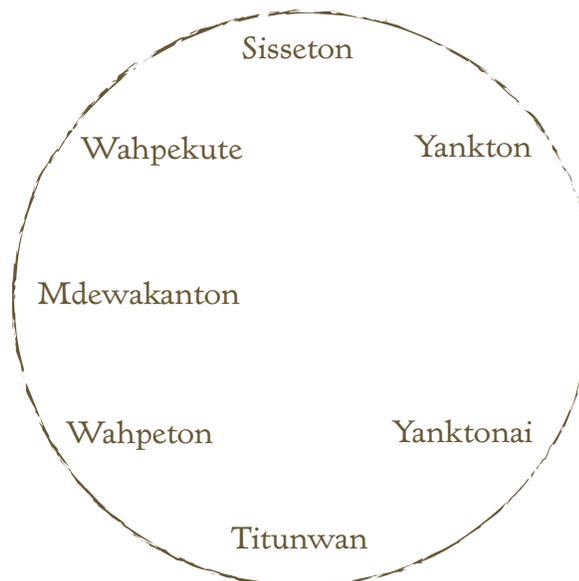
Yankton  
Yanktonai

### Western Sioux (Lakota)

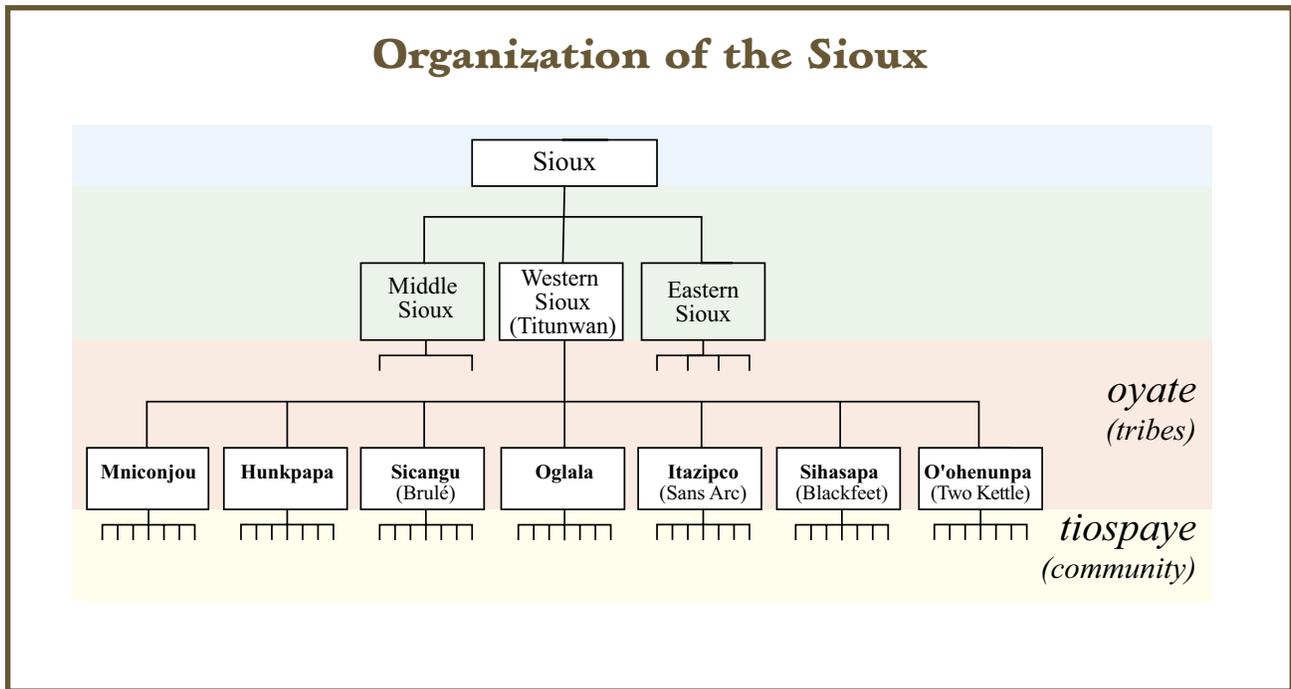
Titunwan

### Eastern Sioux (Dakota)

Mdewakanton  
Wahpeton  
Wahpekute  
Sisseton



## Organization of the Sioux

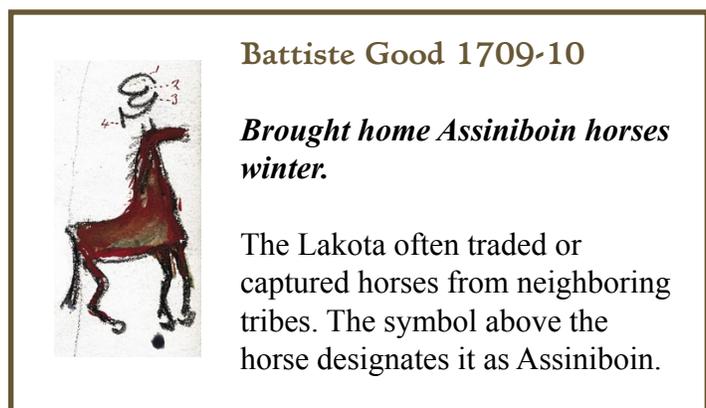


During the summer months, several *tiospayes* would come together and participate in communal activities such as buffalo hunts. Raw materials for tipis, clothing, tools and ritual objects were collected from the hunts, along with the meat for food. Communal bonds were strengthened as friendships were renewed, marriages arranged and ceremonies took place.

When winter arrived, the larger community of *tiospayes* would disband and each group would relocate to a campsite that offered better protection from the wind and cold. The ensuing cold winter months would be spent preparing the hides collecting over the summer, sewing *tipi* covers and clothing, storytelling and reflecting on the past.

## The Role of the Horse

Horses were first brought to North America by the Spanish in the fifteenth century. By the eighteenth century, horses played a significant role in the Lakota way of life. With horses, the Lakota were more efficient hunters—able to quickly travel across a larger expanse of land in search of buffalo and to transport surplus meat and hides for trade. Sometimes bands came into conflict with neighboring tribes. These conflicts were often recorded in winter counts, with certain icons used to denote a specific group. These icons often mirrored a physical trait unique to that group. Horses also allowed for a greater interaction between the Lakota and the Euro-American traders, who were often distinguished in the counts by a broad brimmed hat.



**Battiste Good 1709-10**

***Brought home Assiniboin horses winter.***

The Lakota often traded or captured horses from neighboring tribes. The symbol above the horse designates it as Assiniboin.