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# Tribes of the Sioux Nation



Michael Johnson • Illustrated by Jonathan Smith

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*Series editor* Martin Windrow

# THE TRIBES OF THE SIOUX NATION

## INTRODUCTION

**T**HE SIOUX are perhaps the most famous tribe of North American Indians. Their western branch, the Teton division, were probably the most powerful and numerous of the so-called Plains Indian peoples. The Plains Indians, who were dependent upon the horse for mobility and the bison for food, were a mix of older cultural traditions reformed by recent migration to the Plains ecological area. Woodland Algonkians, followed later by other northern forest relatives, occupied the northern Plains (Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Arapaho), whilst the partly horticultural Siouan-speaking tribes already occupied the Missouri valley, adding to the Caddoan people (Pawnee), who were long-time horticultural occupants of the area.

It would seem that by 1700 AD some Sioux had moved west from their traditional homes on the Mississippi River to the Lake Traverse region of present-day South Dakota; by 1780 they were ranging on the west side of the Missouri River and had penetrated as far west as the Black Hills. Other peoples moved to the High Plains from the west (Comanche) and north (Plains Apache), and there were some whose ancestors had probably eked out an existence on the margins of the area. The mobility now granted by the acquisition of the horse had transformed Indian life. Horses were introduced to the south-western tribes in the 17th century by the Spanish colonists, and had spread north via intertribal trade, ultimately forming vast herds of hardy wild ponies. Tribal groups travelled widely following the herds of bison which now provided basic food, supplemented by deer, pronghorn antelope and wild foods. A few still raised vegetables from small gardens. Some tribes remained horticulturists (Mandan, Hidatsa), others quickly adopted a completely nomadic High Plains culture (Crow).

The Sioux have a tradition that at one time the whole people resided within the present state of Minnesota, originally at Mille Lacs and later near the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers for several generations. They were first reported by the French explorer Jean Nicolet in 1640, although the first actual meeting between Europeans and the Sioux probably occurred some 20 years later when the explorers Radisson and Groseilliers spent a winter of near-starvation – probably in eastern Minnesota – when visited by some Sioux. As a result of pressure from the Ojibwa (Chippewa), who were armed by the French

**Flying Pipe (*Canupa Kinyan*), Yankton Sioux, wearing a shirt with porcupine quilled strips and hair fringes. He holds an iron pipe-tomahawk and an eagle wing fan. (Photograph William Henry Jackson, c1872)**





**Teton Sioux woman and Assiniboine child painted by Karl Bodmer in 1833. The woman wears a buffalo robe with painted designs, and her moccasins appear to be the soft-sole type which preceded the common form with separate, hard soles widely used from the 1850s onwards. Her dress may be the rare side-fold construction, unknown in later years. (Print, author's collection)**



fur traders, the Sioux began a movement westward. Coincidentally horses were obtained in trade and war by their western bands, which hastened the transfer from a mixed horticultural and hunting Prairie economy to a truly nomadic High Plains culture. Whilst the change was ultimately complete for the numerous western branch of the Sioux – the Teton Sioux – other branches remained largely marginal.

There were seven branches of the people called Sioux, a name derived from a French corruption of the Ojibwa (Chippewa) term *nadowe-is-iw-ug* meaning ‘small adder’ or ‘enemy’ – a derogatory term applied by their traditional enemies. Sometimes the tribe as a whole are termed *Dakota* or the slight variations of that word in the three varying dialects of the language spoken by the tribe – *Dakota*, *Nakota* and *Lakota*. In the English language (and despite its origin) the name ‘Sioux’ is the more correct term to describe the whole or any component part of the people, except when referring to their linguistic divisions. (However, see note on nomenclature opposite).

The term *Dakota* is said to mean ‘allies’, and correctly refers to the language spoken by the seven sub-tribes, a member of the so-called Siouan linguistic family widely spoken by several tribes in the Mississippi and Missouri river valleys (and a divergent branch in the Carolinas). The Dakota language is divided into three dialects. The eastern or *Dakota* proper was spoken by the four sub-tribes who remained within the present boundaries of Minnesota – the Mdewakanton, Wahpekute, Sisseton and Wahpeton. The *Nakota* dialect was spoken by the middle division – two sub-tribes, the Yankton and Yanktonai. The western or *Lakota* dialect was spoken by a single sub-tribe, the Teton. The terms Dakota, Nakota and Lakota were once employed by the speakers of the three dialects to identify both their own dialect and the language of the entire Sioux tribe.

The original seven sub-tribes, when living in their traditional eastern location, were also sometimes called the ‘Seven Council Fires’. All seven were further divided into bands. The Teton branch – the largest division of the Sioux, outnumbering the other six together – was divided into seven large bands each sometimes large enough to be considered a sub-tribe itself. As far as can be determined, the Sioux as a whole probably always numbered between 35,000 and 50,000 people of which two-thirds were Teton or Western Sioux. Today perhaps 80,000 descendants are enrolled at various reservations, about half resident. However, the numbers of full-bloods are rapidly decreasing, and probably stand at less than 25% of that total today.

## Note on nomenclature

The term *Sioux* first recorded by Nicolet in 1640 became a substitute for *Oceti Sakowin*, 'seven fireplaces' i.e. Seven Council Fires. Sioux, like Cree and Ojibwa, became the English names for whole tribes through common usage, despite the huge area of geographical distribution and numerous branches and dialectic variations which came to be recognised for each. Lakota, Nakota and Dakota are native terms in the three dialects for the Sioux as a whole; despite their constant misuse, they are not separate tribal names. The careless use of the suffix '-Sioux' to describe constituent parts of the tribe, e.g. Teton Sioux or Oglala Sioux is incorrect; these would suggest a parallel status within the tribe, when the Oglala are a sub-group of the Teton.

Despite its use in the title of this book, I have also generally avoided in the text the term 'nation', which strictly speaking suggests a united society and a political state involving coercion rather than cohesion. I am, however, fully conscious of the fact that in recent times reservation tribal communities under various influences, internal and external, have used the term in order to meet the perceived requirements of the 'Predominant Society'.

The geographical terms 'Eastern Sioux' and 'Western Sioux' would seem adequate, while such terms as Dakota Sioux, Lakota Sioux, Teton Lakota, Oglala Lakota Nation etc. are strictly wrong and confusing designations. The most cogent examination of this problem is that by Powers (1975 – see Bibliography); he suggests that Teton and Oglala are perfectly adequate designations in themselves; the Indians after all knew who they were, and we should at least attempt an understanding of their tribal structure.

In very recent times Western Sioux, particularly those living in South Dakota, have adopted 'Lakota' – their dialectic name – as a tribal name, since they view 'Sioux' as a Euro-American and derogatory term. Nevertheless, for the sake of consistency I have retained in this text 'Sioux' as the historic English language name for the tribe.



**Big Head, Upper Yanktonai Sioux, c1872. He holds a pipe and an eagle feather fan, and wears a fur turban, fur-wrapped braids and beaded blanket strip. (Photograph, author's collection)**

## Sioux tribal structure

The seven branches of the Sioux people are as follows, divided into their three dialectic divisions A, B & C.

NB: For details of present-day reservation populations, see Table B on page 9.

### **(A) Eastern Sioux or Dakota dialectic division**

(Also known as *Santee*, from *Isanyati* – 'dwellers at a knife shaped lake', an ancient village at Mille Lacs – although some historians believe this term should only apply to the first two sub-tribes.)

#### **(1) Mdewakanton**

'Spirit Lake Dwellers', said to have taken their name from their former homes at Mille Lacs in present eastern Minnesota, and along the Rum River, as far south as Red Wing on the Mississippi River. The Mdewakanton, with the Wahpekute, were sometimes referred to as the 'Lower Council'. They had several village bands, the Kiyuksa and KAPOZHA the most prominent. By treaties with the USA in 1837 and 1851 they ceded all their lands east of the Mississippi for a reservation along the Minnesota River. However, following shabby treatment by both settlers and government they were the principal participants in the Minnesota uprising of 1862-63, after which they moved west of the Missouri River or fled to Canada, although a few re-established themselves in

Minnesota. Their descendants have largely merged with other Santees but they probably predominate on the old Santee-Niobrara Reservation, Nebraska, and in four small settlements in Minnesota. A few may have been incorporated with other Santees at Sioux Valley and Birdtail in Manitoba, Canada. They probably numbered 2,000 in around 1780; today they have about 5,000 descendants mixed with Wahpekute, mostly mixed-blood.

#### **(2) Wahpekute**

'Leaf Shooters', a branch of the Eastern Sioux who once lived on the Cannon and Blue Earth Rivers in southern Minnesota, particularly around Faribault's Trading Post. In early 1857 a few Wahpekutes under Chief Inkpaduta killed a number of white settlers in the Spirit Lake region of north-western Iowa. The Wahpekutes had been split by dissension since about 1840, and some had not taken part in the treaties of 1851 when required to move to the Lower Agency of their reservation along the Minnesota River. They were sometimes known as the 'Lower Council Sioux', together with the Mdewakanton. After the uprising of 1862-63 the Wahpekutes mainly joined the various Mdewakanton bands, mostly at Crow Creek Reservation, South Dakota, and moved later to Niobrara, Nebraska, but never again reported as a separate tribe. Their

(continued on page 7)