



The Lakota Emergence Story

In Lakota culture, history is passed down to new generations through the spoken word. There are many different versions of the Emergence Story, varying from band to band and family to family. This version comes from the Cheyenne Creek community on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation of the Oglala Lakota tribe. The story was told by Wilmer Mesteth—a tribal historian and spiritual leader—to Sina Bear Eagle, who retells it in the following passage.

This story begins at a time when the earth was here — the plants and the animals were still being named and brought into existence — but there were no people living on the earth, and no bison. People at that time lived underground in the spirit lodge, waiting for the earth to be prepared for them to live upon it.

To get to the spirit lodge, one must take a passageway through what the ancestors referred to as Oniya Oshoka, where the earth “breathes inside.” This place is known today as Wind Cave, referred to in modern Lakota as Makoce Ohloka or the “breathing earth.” Somewhere, hidden deep inside this passageway, is a portal to the spirit lodge and the spirit world.

There were two spirits who lived on the surface of the earth: Iktomi and Anog-Ite. Iktomi, the spider, was the trickster spirit. Before he was Iktomi, his name was Woksape — “Wisdom” — but lost his name and position when he helped the evil spirit Gnaskinyan play a trick on all the other spirits. Anog-Ite, the double face woman, had two faces on her head. On one side, she had a beautiful face, rivaling the beauty of any other woman who existed. On the other, she had a horrible face, which was twisted and gnarled. To see this face would put chills down anyone’s spine.

Anog-Ite was once Ite, the human wife of the wind spirit, Tate. She longed to be a spirit herself, so when the evil Gnaskinyan told her dressing up as the moon spirit, Hanwi,

would grant her wish, she followed without question. Gnaskinyan used both Ite and Woksape as pawns in his trick on the other spirits. The Creator, Takuskanskan, decided not to punish Gnaskinyan for this trick, because evil does what’s in its nature. Woksape and Ite were both punished because they let their pride guide their actions and allowed themselves to be guided by evil, when both should have known better. Takuskanskan transformed the two into Iktomi and Anog-Ite, allowing Iktomi to play tricks forever and Anog-Ite to be the spirit she wanted to be. Both were banished to the surface of the earth.

Iktomi and Anog-Ite had only each other for company. Iktomi spent his time playing tricks on Anog-Ite, torturing her and never allowing her to live in peace, but this pastime soon bored him. He wanted new people to play tricks on, so he set his sights on the humans. He knew he needed help for this trick; he asked Anog-Ite, promising he’d never bother her again. She agreed to these terms and began loading a leather pack.

Anog-Ite filled this pack with buckskin clothing beautifully decorated with porcupine quills,

different types of berries, and dried meat. She then loaded the pack onto the back of her wolf companion, Sungmanitu Tanka. When the wolf was ready, Iktomi opened a hole in the ground and sent the wolf inside Oniya Oshoka to find the humans. The wolf found the portal and went inside to meet the humans.

Once there, he showed the people the pack on his back. One man took out the buckskin clothing and felt the soft leather. His wife tried on a dress and, when he looked at her, he thought the dress accentuated her beauty. Next they took out the meat, tasted it, and passed it around amongst some of the people. The meat intrigued them. They’d never hunted before, and had never tasted anything like meat. They wanted more.

The wolf told them if they followed him to the surface of the Earth, he’d show them where to find meat and all the other gifts he brought.

The leader of the humans was a man named Tokahe, “The First One,” and he refused to go with the wolf.



He objected, saying the Creator had instructed them to stay underground, and that's what he'd do. Most of the people stayed with Tokahe, but all those who tried the meat followed the wolf to the surface.

The journey to the surface was long and perilous. When they reached the hole, the first thing the people saw was a giant blue sky above them. The surface of the earth was bright, and it was summertime, so all the plants were in bloom. The people looked around and thought the earth's surface was the most gorgeous place they'd ever been before.

The wolf led the people to the lodge of Anog-Ite, who was in disguise; she had her sina—"shawl"—wrapped over her head, hiding her horrible face and revealing only her beautiful face. Anog-Ite invited the people inside, and they asked her about the clothes and the food. She promised to teach the people how to obtain those things, and soon she taught the people how to hunt and how to work and tan an animal hide.

This work was difficult, however. The people never worked much in the spirit world. They grew tired easily and worked slowly. Time passed, and summer turned to fall, then to winter. The people had worked so slowly that, by the time the first snow came, they didn't have enough clothes or food for everyone. They began to freeze and starve.

They returned to the lodge of Anog-Ite to beg for help, but it was then that she revealed her true intentions. She ripped the shawl from her head, revealing her horrible face, and with both faces — beautiful and horrible — laughed at the people. The people recoiled in terror and ran away, so she sent her wolf after them to chase and snap at their heels. They



ran back to the site of the hole from which they'd emerged, only to find that Iktomi had closed it up again, leaving them trapped on the surface.

The people didn't know what to do and they didn't know where to go, so they simply sat down on the ground and began to cry. It was then that the Creator heard them, and asked why they were on the surface. They explained the story of the wolf and Anog-Ite, but the Creator was upset.

The Creator said, "You should not have disobeyed me; now I have to punish you." The way the Creator did that was by transforming them — turning them from people into these great, wild beasts. This was the first bison herd.

Time passed, and the earth was finally ready for people to live upon it. The Creator instructed Tokahe to lead the people through the passageway in the cave and onto the surface. On the way, they stopped to pray four times, stopping last at the entrance.

On the surface, the people saw the hoof prints of a bison. The Creator instructed them to follow that bison. From the bison, they could get food, tools, clothes, and shelter. The bison would lead them to water. Everything they needed to survive on the earth could come from the bison.

When they left the cave, the Creator shrunk the hole from the size of a man to the size it is now, too small for most people to enter, to serve as a reminder so the people would never forget from where they'd come.

