

Native Legends

A Retelling of Ancient Tales
from the Dakota People

by Zitkala-Ša



Oak Meadow

Oak Meadow, Inc.

Post Office Box 615

Putney, Vermont 05346

oakmeadow.com



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Chapter

1

Iktomi and the Ducks

Iktomi is a spider fairy. He wears brown deerskin leggings with long soft fringes on either side, and tiny beaded moccasins on his feet. His long black hair is parted in the middle and wrapped with red bands. Each round braid hangs over a small brown ear and falls forward over his shoulders.

He paints his face with red and yellow, and draws big black rings around his eyes. He wears a deerskin jacket, with brightly colored beads sewed tightly on it. Iktomi dresses like a real Dakota brave. In truth, his paint and deerskins are the best part of him—if ever dress is part of either man or fairy.

Iktomi is a wily fellow. His hands are always busy with mischief. He prefers to spread a snare rather than to earn the smallest thing with honest hunting. Why, he laughs outright with wide open mouth when some simple folk are caught in a trap, sure and fast. He never dreams anything else alive could be as bright and smart as he, and he is full of conceit about how wonderful he is.

Poor Iktomi cannot help being a little imp. And so long as he is a naughty fairy, he cannot find a single good friend or someone to help him when he is in trouble—because he never really helps anyone else. No one really loves him. Those who come to admire his handsome beaded jacket and long fringed leggings soon go away sick and tired of his vain, stuck-up words

and heartless laughter. Thus Iktomi lives alone in a cone-shaped wigwam upon the plain.

One day he sat hungry within his tepee. Suddenly he rushed out, dragging his blanket after him. Quickly spreading it on the ground, he tore up dry tall grass with both his hands and tossed it into the blanket. Tying all the four corners together in a knot, he threw the light bundle of grass over his shoulder. Snatching up a slender willow stick with his free left hand, he started off with a hop and a leap. From side to side bounced the bundle on his back, as he ran light-footed over the uneven ground. Soon he came to the edge of the great level land. On the hilltop he paused for breath. With wicked smacks of his dry parched lips, as if tasting some tender meat, he looked straight into space toward the marshy river bottom. With a thin palm shading his eyes from the western sun, he peered far away into the lowlands.

“Ah-ha!” grunted he, satisfied with what he saw. A group of wild ducks were dancing and feasting in the marshes. With wings outspread, tip to tip, they moved up and down in a large circle. Within the ring, around a small drum, sat the chosen singers, nodding their heads and blinking their eyes. They sang in unison a merry dance-song, and beat a lively tattoo on the drum.

Following a winding footpath nearby, came a bent figure of a Dakota brave. He bore on his back a very large bundle. With a willow cane he propped himself up as he staggered along beneath his burden.

“Ho! Who is there?” called out a curious old duck, still bobbing up and down in the circular dance. Hereupon the drummers stretched their necks until they strangled their song for a look at the stranger passing by.

“Ho, Iktomi! Old fellow, pray tell us what you carry in your blanket. Do not hurry off! Stop! Halt!” urged one of the singers.

“Stop! Stay! Show us what is in your blanket!” cried out other voices.

“My friends, I must not spoil your dance. Oh, you would not care to see if you only knew what is in my blanket. Sing on! Dance on! I must not show you what I carry on my back,” answered Iktomi, nudging his own sides with his elbows. This reply broke up the ring entirely. Now all the ducks crowded about Iktomi.

“We must see what you carry! We must know what is in your blanket!” they shouted in both his ears. Some even brushed their wings against the mysterious bundle.

Nudging himself again, wily Iktomi said, “My friends, ’tis only a pack of songs I carry in my blanket.”

“Oh, then let us hear your songs!” cried the curious ducks. At length Iktomi consented to sing his songs. With delight all the ducks flapped their wings and cried together, “Hoye! Hoye!”

Iktomi, with great care, laid down his bundle on the ground. “I will build first a round straw house, for I never sing my songs in the open air,” said he.

Quickly he bent green willow sticks, planting both ends of each pole into the earth. These he covered thick with reeds and grasses. Soon the straw hut was ready. One by one the fat ducks waddled in through a small opening, which was the only entranceway. Beside the door Iktomi stood smiling, as the ducks, eyeing his bundle of songs, strutted into the hut.

In a strange low voice Iktomi began his old tunes. All the ducks sat round-eyed in a circle about the mysterious singer. It was dim in that straw hut, for Iktomi had not forgotten to cover

up the small entrance way. All of a sudden his song burst into full voice. As the startled ducks sat uneasily on the ground, Iktomi changed his tune into a minor strain. These were the words he sang:

*Istokmus wacipo, tuwayatunwanpi
kinhan ista nisasapi kta,
With eyes closed you must dance.
He who dares to open his eyes,
forever red eyes shall have.*

Up rose the circle of seated ducks and holding their wings close against their sides began to dance to the rhythm of Iktomi's song and drum. With eyes closed they did dance! Iktomi ceased to beat his drum. He began to sing louder and faster. He seemed to be moving about in the center of the ring. No duck dared blink a wink. Each one shut his eyes very tightly and danced even harder. Up and down! Shifting to the right of them they hopped round and round in that blind dance. It was a difficult dance for the curious folk.

At length one of the dancers could close his eyes no longer! It was Skiska who peeped the least tiny blink at Iktomi within the center of the circle. "Oh! Oh!" squawked he in awful terror! "Run! Fly! Iktomi is twisting your heads and breaking your necks! Run out and fly! Fly!"

Hereupon the ducks opened their eyes. There beside Iktomi's bundle of songs lay a number of their crowd, flat on their backs. Out they flew through the opening Skiska had made as he rushed forth with his alarm, except those for whom it was too late. As they soared high into the blue sky they cried to one another, "Oh! Your eyes are red-red!" "And yours are red-red!" For the warning words of the magic song had proven true.

“Ah-ha!” laughed Iktomi, untying the four corners of his blanket, “I shall sit no more hungry within my dwelling.” Homeward he trudged along with nice fat ducks in his blanket. He left the little straw hut for the rains and winds to pull down.

Having reached his own tepee on the high level lands, Iktomi kindled a large fire outdoors. He planted sharp-pointed sticks around the leaping flames. On each stake he fastened a duck to roast. A few he buried under the ashes to bake. Disappearing within his tepee, he came out again with some huge seashells. These were his dishes.

Placing one under each roasting duck, he muttered, “The sweet fat oozing out will taste well with the hard-cooked breasts.”

Heaping more willows upon the fire, Iktomi sat down on the ground with crossed shins. His long chin between his knees pointed toward the red flames, while his eyes were on the browning ducks. Just above his ankles he clasped and unclasped his long bony fingers. Now and then he impatiently sniffed the savory odor. The brisk wind that stirred the fire also played with a squeaky old tree beside Iktomi’s wigwam.

From side to side the tree was swaying and crying in an old man’s voice, “Help! I’ll break! I’ll fall!”

Iktomi shrugged his great shoulders, but did not once take his eyes from the ducks. The dripping of amber oil into pearly dishes, drop by drop, pleased his hungry eyes. He impatiently sniffed the savory odor. Still the old tree man called for help.

“Hee! What sound is it that makes my ear ache!” exclaimed Iktomi, holding a hand on his ear.

He rose and looked around. The squeaking came from the tree. Then he began climbing the tree to find the disagreeable sound. He placed his foot right on a cracked limb without seeing it. Just then a whiff of wind came rushing by and pressed

together the broken edges. There in a strong wooden hand Iktomi's foot was caught.

"Oh! My foot is crushed!" he howled. In vain he pulled and puffed to free himself. While sitting as a prisoner on the tree, he spied, through his tears, a pack of gray wolves roaming over the level lands. Waving his hands toward them, he called in his loudest voice, "Hee! Gray wolves! Don't you come here! I'm caught fast in the tree so that my duck feast is getting cold. Don't you come to eat up my meal."

Upon hearing Iktomi's words, the leader of the pack turned to his comrades and said, "Hear the foolish fellow! He says he has a duck feast to be eaten! Let us hurry there for our share!" Away bounded the wolves toward Iktomi's lodge.

From the tree Iktomi watched the hungry wolves eat up his nicely browned fat ducks. His foot pained him more and more. He heard them crack the bones with their strong long teeth and eat out the tasty marrow. Now severe pains shot up from his foot through his whole body.

"Hin-hin-hin!" sobbed Iktomi. Real tears washed brown streaks across his red-painted cheeks. Smacking their lips, the wolves began to leave the place, when Iktomi cried out like a pouting child, "At least you have left me my ducks baking under the ashes!"

"Ho! Po!" shouted the mischievous wolves, "He says more ducks are to be found under the ashes! Come! Let us have our fill!" Running back to the dead fire, they pawed out the ducks with such rude haste that a cloud of ashes rose like gray smoke over them.

"Hin-hin-hin!" moaned Iktomi, when the wolves had scampered off. All too late, the sturdy breeze returned, and, passing by, pulled apart the broken edges of the tree. Iktomi was released. But alas! He had no duck feast.



Chapter

2

Iktomi's Blanket

Alone within his tepee sat Iktomi. The sun was but a hand's breadth from the western edge of land.

"Those, bad, bad gray wolves! They ate up all my nice fat ducks!" muttered he, rocking his body to and fro. He was cuddling the evil memory he bore those hungry wolves. At last he ceased to sway his body backward and forward, but sat still and stiff as a stone image. "I'll go to Inyan, the great-grandfather, and pray for food!" he exclaimed.

At once he hurried forth from his tepee and, with his blanket over one shoulder, drew nigh to a huge rock on a hillside. With half-crouching, half-running strides, he fell upon Inyan with outspread hands.

"Grandfather! Pity me. I am hungry. I am starving. Give me food. Great-grand-father, give me meat to eat!" he cried. All the while he stroked and caressed the face of the great stone god.

The all-powerful Great Spirit, who makes the trees and grass, can hear the voice of those who pray in many varied ways. The hearing of Inyan, the large hard stone, was the one most sought after. He was the great-grandfather, for he had sat upon the hillside many, many seasons. He had seen the prairie put on a snow-white blanket and then change it for a bright green robe more than a thousand times. Still unaffected by the myriad moons he rested on the everlasting hill, listening to the prayers

of Indian warriors. Before the finding of the magic arrow he had sat there.

Now, as Iktomi prayed and wept before the great-grandfather, the sky in the west was red like a glowing face. The sunset poured a soft mellow light on the huge gray stone and the solitary figure beside it. It was the smile of the Great Spirit upon the grandfather and the wayward child.

The prayer was heard. Iktomi knew it. "Now, Grandfather, accept my offering—it is all I have," said Iktomi as he spread his half-worn blanket upon Inyan's cold shoulders. Then Iktomi, happy with the smile of the sunset sky, followed a foot-path leading toward a thicketed ravine. He had not gone many paces into the shrubbery when before him lay a freshly killed deer!

"This is the answer from the red western sky!" cried Iktomi, with hands uplifted. Slipping a long thin blade from his belt, he cut large chunks of choice meat. Sharpening some willow sticks, he planted them around a woodpile he had ready to kindle. On these stakes he meant to roast the venison.

While he was briskly rubbing two long sticks to start a fire, the sun in the west fell out of the sky below the edge of land. Twilight was over all. Iktomi felt the cold night air on his bare neck and shoulders. "Ough!" he shivered as he wiped his knife on the grass. Tucking it in a beaded case hanging from his belt, Iktomi stood erect, looking about.

He shivered again. "Ough! Ah! I am cold. I wish I had my blanket!" whispered he, hovering over the pile of dry sticks and the sharp stakes round about it. Suddenly he paused and dropped his hands at his sides.

"The old great-grandfather does not feel the cold as I do. He does not need my old blanket as I do. I wish I had not given it to him. Oh! I think I'll run up there and take it back!" said he, pointing his long chin toward the large gray stone.

Iktomi had no need of his blanket in the warm sunshine, and it had been very easy to part with a thing that he could not miss. But the chilly night wind quite froze his ardent thank-offering. Thus running up the hillside, his teeth chattering all the way, he drew near to Inyan, the sacred symbol. Seizing one corner of the half-worn blanket, Iktomi pulled it off with a jerk.

“Give my blanket back, old Grandfather! You do not need it. I do!” This was very wrong, yet Iktomi did it, for his wit was not wisdom.

Drawing the blanket tight over his shoulders, he descended the hill with hurrying feet. He was soon upon the edge of the ravine. A young moon, like a bright bent bow, climbed up from the southwest horizon a little way into the sky. In this pale light Iktomi stood motionless as a ghost amid the thicket. His woodpile was not yet kindled. His pointed stakes were still bare as he had left them. But where was the deer—the venison he had felt warm in his hands a moment ago? It was gone. Only the dry rib bones lay on the ground like giant fingers. Iktomi was troubled.

At length, stooping over the white dried bones, he took hold of one and shook it. The bones rattled together at his touch. Iktomi let go his hold. He sprang back amazed. And though he wore a blanket his teeth chattered more than ever. Then, instead of being grieved that he had taken back his blanket, he cried aloud, “Hin-hin-hin! If only I had eaten the venison before going for my blanket!”

Those tears no longer moved the hand of the Generous Giver. They were selfish tears. The Great Spirit does not heed them ever.



Chapter

3

Iktomi and the Muskrat

Beside a white lake, beneath a large grown willow tree, sat Iktomi on the bare ground. The heap of smoldering ashes told of a recent open fire. With ankles crossed together around a pot of soup, Iktomi bent over some delicious boiled fish. Quickly he dipped his black horn spoon into the soup, for he was ravenous. Iktomi had no regular meal times. Often when he was hungry he went without food. Well hidden between the lake and the wild rice that grew on its banks, he looked nowhere save into the pot of fish. Not knowing when the next meal would be, he meant to eat enough now to last some time.

“How now, my friend!” said a voice out of the wild rice. Iktomi jumped. He almost choked on his soup. He peered through the long reeds from where he sat with his long horn spoon in mid-air.

“Hello, my friend!” said the voice again, this time close at his side. Iktomi turned and there stood a dripping muskrat who had just come out of the lake.

“Oh, it is my friend who startled me. I wondered if among the wild rice some spirit voice was talking. Hello, my friend!” said Iktomi. The muskrat stood smiling. On his lips hung a ready “Yes, my friend,” when Iktomi would ask, “My friend, will you sit down beside me and share my food?”

That was the custom of the plains people. Yet Iktomi sat silent. He hummed an old dance-song and beat gently on the

edge of the pot with his buffalo-horn spoon. The muskrat began to feel awkward before such lack of hospitality and wished he had stayed underwater.

After many heart throbs Iktomi stopped drumming with his horn ladle, and looking upward into the muskrat's face he said, "My friend, let us run a race to see who shall win this pot of fish. If I win, I shall not need to share it with you. If you win, you shall have half of it." Springing to his feet, Iktomi began at once to tighten the belt about his waist.

"My friend Ikto, I cannot run a race with you! I am not a swift runner, and you are nimble as a deer. We shall not run any race together," answered the hungry muskrat.

For a moment Iktomi stood with a hand on his long protruding chin. His eyes were fixed on something in the air. The muskrat looked out of the corners of his eyes without moving his head. He watched the wily Iktomi concocting a plot.

"Yes, yes," said Iktomi, suddenly turning his gaze on the unwelcome visitor, "I shall carry a large stone on my back. That will slacken my usual speed, and the race will be a fair one." Saying this he laid a firm hand upon the muskrat's shoulder and started off along the edge of the lake.

When they reached the opposite side Iktomi poked about in search of a heavy stone. He found one half-buried in the shallow water. Pulling it out on dry land, he wrapped it in his blanket.

"Now, my friend, you shall run on the left side of the lake, I on the other. The race is for the boiled fish in yonder kettle!" said Iktomi.

The muskrat helped to lift the heavy stone upon Iktomi's back. Then they parted. Each took a narrow path through the tall reeds fringing the shore. Iktomi found his load a heavy one.

Perspiration hung like beads on his brow. His chest heaved hard and fast. He looked across the lake to see how far the muskrat had gone, but nowhere did he see any sign of him.

“Well, he is running low under the wild rice!” said he to himself. Yet as he scanned the tall grasses on the lake shore, he saw not one stir as if to make way for the runner. “Ah, has he gone so fast ahead that the disturbed grasses in his trail have quieted again?” exclaimed Iktomi. With that thought he quickly dropped the heavy stone. “No more of this!” he said, patting his chest with both hands.

Off with a springing bound, he ran swiftly toward the goal. Tufts of reeds and grass fell flat under his feet. Hardly had they raised their heads when Iktomi was many paces gone. Soon he reached the heap of cold ashes. Iktomi halted stiff as if he had struck an invisible cliff. His black eyes showed a ring of white about them as he stared at the empty ground. There was no pot of boiled fish! There was no muskrat in sight!

“Oh, if only I had shared my food like a real Dakota, I would not have lost it all! Why did I not know the muskrat would run through the water? He swims faster than I could ever run! That is what he has done. He has laughed at me for carrying a weight on my back while he shot hither like an arrow!” Crying thus to himself, Iktomi stepped to the water’s brink. He stooped forward with a hand on each bent knee and peeped far into the deep water.

“There!” he exclaimed, “I see you, my friend, sitting with your ankles wrapped around my little pot of fish! My friend, I am hungry. Give me a bone!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” laughed the water-man, the muskrat. The sound did not rise up out of the lake, for it came down from overhead. With his hands still on his knees, Iktomi turned his

face upward into the great willow tree. Opening wide his mouth he begged, "My friend, my friend, give me a bone to gnaw!"

"Ha! Ha!" laughed the muskrat, and leaning over the limb he sat upon, he let fall a small sharp bone that dropped right into Iktomi's throat. Iktomi almost choked before he could get it out. In the tree the muskrat sat laughing loud. "Next time, say to a visiting friend, 'Be seated beside me, my friend. Please share my food.' Then perhaps you won't lose it all."