



The Iroquois Clan System and Blood Quantum

By: The Oneida Trust and Enrollment Committee

This series of articles is designed to inform Oneida citizens about enrollment issues. The total number of Oneida enrolled members is expected to decline within the next 10 years. The goal of these articles is to generate community conversations about citizenship and belonging so that we may explore our options.

Do you know what your clan is? Turtle, Bear or Wolf? We say today that we have three clans but really we don't have three...we have nine. Due to boarding schools, acculturation, and assimilation many of us have forgotten that there are three different Wolf Clans, three different Turtle Clans and three different Bear Clans. The Wolf Clans are the Grey Wolf, Red Wolf, and Timber Wolf. The Turtle Clans are the Snapping Turtle, Mud Turtle and Painted (or Sun) Turtle. The Bear Clans are the Brown Bear, Black Bear, and Yearling Bear. Our traditional Oneida governing system includes nine Clan Mothers, nine Chiefs, and so on due to the fact that we have nine separate clan families.

Clan identity is perhaps one of our most basic and ancient ways of belonging and identifying ourselves. A long time ago, to be Oneida meant you were part of an Oneida clan. You were born or adopted into a clan. Adoption was a common practice then, and still happens today. Over the years, we have turned to other ways to identify ourselves. When the United States Congress passed the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), Native Americans were "encouraged" to abandon traditional governments and adopt a more Euro-American style of government.

Oneidas in Wisconsin voted to adopt an IRA government. From that time going forward, we began tracking the Oneida blood quantum. Blood quantum is a way of identifying someone's lineage and measuring the portion of it that is Oneida. Under the IRA, we began "enrolling" ourselves as "members" of a tribe. Knowledge of the clan system and traditional understandings of identity were often set aside or forgotten.

It is ironic that the federal government intentionally encouraged Oneida and other Native nations to identify themselves through blood quantum considering nowhere in the United States Constitution does it encourage or even consider tracking blood

quantum for American citizens. The concept was borrowed from the past. European royal families struggled for centuries over the custom of intermarriage and designed systems to document bloodlines to prevent infighting and corruption.

Oneida, as a community and over time, adopted policies and ways of thinking that emphasize blood quantum. Today, enrollment is necessary to receive most of the tribe's benefits, and enrollment is contingent upon having at least 1/4 Oneida blood quantum. This is a concept that would be foreign to our ancestors. Our ancestors identified fellow Oneidas by clan identity, by family connection, by a common language and by shared values, beliefs, and more.

The Oneida Nation cannot be sustained tracking lineage by blood quantum; it is a system destined to fail. In a few decades, the population of the Oneida Nation will be only a fraction of what it is now. This crisis cannot be avoided unless we redefine ourselves according to our own terms; not those of the federal government. Whether we look to our past for a more traditional definition of identity, or look forward to something different, we cannot stay as we are. How do you identify yourself?

For more information about Sustain Oneida please visit:

<https://www.facebook.com/OneidaTrust>

<https://oneida-nsn.gov/bcc/TrustEnrollmentCommittee/>

For comments or questions please email: sustainoneida@oneidanation.org