



## **Whose House Do You Belong To?**

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.*

The word Longhouse is often used in different ways and misunderstood. There are at least three different meanings of the word. The first is the most basic: Longhouse means the type of home or structure in which Oneida people traditionally lived. The second is an extension of the first: to be a Longhouse person, meaning Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), or a descendent of people who lived in Longhouses. By this definition, all Oneida people are Longhouse people. The third use of the word is in reference to beliefs and living a certain way: to be Longhouse, meaning they go to the Longhouse for ceremonies and follow traditional teachings. A person may identify themselves as a Longhouse person by the second or third definitions (or both). This can lead to confusion.

It is important to note the third definition is often referred to as a religion. Our traditional teachings included spiritual elements, but our government and social rules and expectations were also included in those teachings. It is more accurate to refer to the traditional teachings as a way of life – the Longhouse way of life. Spiritual, social, and political elements were all tied together in the traditional culture. Today we tend to talk about them in separate terms.

Not all Longhouse people (our second definition) follow the Longhouse way of life (our third definition). About 400 years ago, Oneida and other Haudenosaunee people were introduced to the concepts of Christianity by Europeans. Gradually, Christian beliefs and values changed the political, social, and spiritual landscape of the Oneida Nation. Following the American Revolution, a Seneca man named Skanyatali yó (Handsome Lake) had several visions. From the first vision in 1799 until his death in 1815, Skanyatali yó shared a message of revitalization for traditional teachings, getting back to holding the ceremonies, and keeping our culture intact.

About the time that Skanyatali yó's message was spreading to the other Haudenosaunee, the Oneida were losing vast tracts of land and were forced to leave their ancestral homelands in New York. Many Oneida who came to the reservation on Duck Creek were Christian Oneidas. Over the course of the 1800s, fewer and fewer Oneida in Wisconsin practiced the spiritual components of the Longhouse way of life. Those who did, practiced "underground," or secretly, to avoid persecution by Christian Oneida.

During the 1900s, the effects of assimilation, boarding schools, and acculturation began to take a toll on Oneida in Wisconsin. The Oneida government transitioned from the Chiefs to an elected government, and with that change, the political and social elements of the traditional teachings continued to weaken.

In the very early 1980s the ceremonies began to be re-introduced in Oneida, Wisconsin, including Kalihwi yó, the message shared by Handsome Lake. The Oneida School System and the Language program have contributed significantly to our cultural revitalization. Since then, the spiritual and social aspects of our traditional teachings have been strengthened. We have yet to address the political issues, such as blood quantum and the foreign governing system we currently use.

If we imagine all Oneida people as a landscape, over the course of our history that landscape has diversified and changed in appearance and way of being. However, it has remained unified despite changing belief systems, political systems and social patterns. There is still something that holds us together as a nation, as a people. Could it be our sovereignty? It doesn't matter if you are a traditional Oneida, a Christian Oneida, or any other category of Oneida; we are all still Oneida. Our individual beliefs and ways of life are a part of our identity, but it seems that collectively we share something else in common.

Maybe the blood quantum issue isn't an identity issue after all. If the blood quantum concept were removed as a requirement of tribal citizenship, wouldn't you still be Oneida? It seems our identity is rooted in the same place as our sovereignty. Whatever new definition we develop of what it means to be Oneida should support and strengthen the concepts of our sovereignty.

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