



Blood, Nation, and Citizenship in the 21st Century

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.

As Oneida people, we must remember that we are not just racial minorities; we are also citizens of a separate nation. The fact that we have a sovereign right to self-government is what makes us different from any other racial or ethnic group in the United States. Even the U.S. Constitution describes Indian tribes as separate governments. The Constitution's Commerce Clause states that Congress has the right "To regulate commerce with foreign nations, and among the several states, and with the Indian tribes." As a sovereign nation, we have the power to determine who can be citizens of the Oneida Nation, and it does not necessarily have to be based upon race and the amount of Oneida blood that someone has.

Since time immemorial, membership within the Oneida Nation had nothing to do with blood DNA. For instance, when we lived alongside the Stockbridge-Munsee people in New York, there was much intermarriage between our tribes. We also mixed with people from other Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) tribes. Beginning in 1936, however, we began to base Oneida Nation citizenship upon blood quantum. Many other tribes also adopted blood quantum requirements during the 1930s. Today, more and more Oneidas are of mixed race and no longer meet the minimum $\frac{1}{4}$ blood requirement. Soon, few may meet that threshold. The United States as a whole is becoming much more multi-racial as well. Now is an important time to consider whether or not blood should remain the *only* factor that qualifies one for Oneida citizenship. Multiple routes to citizenship would be more inclusive.

What exactly does it mean to be an Oneida Nation citizen in the 21st century? Is it about looking like a "real Indian"? Many people don't, including some tribal members who exceed the minimum blood requirement. Is it about being from the reservation? Most of our tribal members live off the reservation, and some in distant parts of the country. Is it about being knowledgeable of our traditional

ways? Large numbers of Oneidas are strictly Christian. Some Native scholars have argued that “peoplehood” is based upon shared bonds through territory, language, sacred history, and ceremony. Must one have ¼ Oneida blood to be part of those social bonds? After all, don’t we all know someone (perhaps the spouse of a tribal member) who is a recognizable member of our community, yet is not an enrolled citizen because they lack Oneida blood? Should we allow non-members, regardless of their race, to apply for citizenship just as the United States does? We dedicate much time to discussing what our rights are as tribal citizens, but what are the *responsibilities* of Oneida citizenship?

These and other difficult questions need to be asked so we can initiate the gradual process of building an agreement. The blood quantum requirement has become so familiar to us that it can be hard to imagine how tribal membership could be determined without it. What we all must keep in mind, however, is that the blood quantum system is a relative newcomer in our community. Perhaps we will decide as a nation to keep some form of it, but we ought to enter into that discussion realizing that race and citizenship status need not be one and the same, and that we can think outside the blood quantum box if we so choose.

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