

Land and Language: The Struggle for National, Territorial, and Linguistic Integrity of the Oneida People

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The ability to maintain a living community is a functional requirement for the natural transmission of culture and language. The Oneida Indians, aboriginal people of what is now the State of New York, have struggled for more than two centuries to sustain their community and culture. The Oneidas have experienced an aggressive programme of expropriation, the division of their community, and the exile of the majority of their people to Canada and the State of Wisconsin. Only within the last few decades have the Oneidas begun to achieve some success in rebuilding their economic base and in reclaiming some of their native lands, but in the meantime their language has been almost entirely lost. They have attempted to use recent legal victories to rebuild their land base, their community, and their basis for cultural and linguistic transmission, but continue to confront a hostile and intimidating social and legal orientation on the part of the larger community, as well as divisive conflict among themselves. An examination of the case of the Oneidas illuminates the continuing impact of the European expansion into the Americas and of policies and practices that have been inimical to the retention of native cultures and languages.

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I think once you learn the language you see the world through the Oneidas' eyes, not through English ones, with the values being taught right with the language. The values that are core and central to our culture that have been there before the Europeans came here... When we lose our language, then we are no longer Oneidas. Then we are something else. We may look like Oneidas, we may have a reservation, but we are no longer Oneidas, because we have not our language.

Forrest Brooks, Oneida language teacher, Wisconsin
(interviewed by B. Hlebowicz 9 September 2002)

Linguist Leanne Hinton begins her report of the state of Native North American languages with the grim assessment that of the 209 native languages still spoken in North America, children are only learning 49 of them: 'Year by year the number of

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language extinctions has increased while the number of children who are speakers has continued to drop' (2008: 351). An examination of the history of the Oneida Indians, of their programmes, goals and aspirations concerning Oneida language and culture, and of the forces arrayed against the Oneida people, illustrates the challenges American Indians have faced that have led to the circumstances Hinton discusses. Such an examination will also, however, serve to demonstrate the persistence and the resilience of native North Americans in the face of these challenges.

Oneida history speaks eloquently to the struggle that the native peoples of North America have experienced in maintaining their languages and their cultures. For two and a half centuries the Oneidas have fought against the implacable forces of an overwhelming European hegemony, which has worked both deliberately and incidentally toward their destruction as a people. Ironically, many Oneidas were among the first allies of the US, siding with the American colonists in their revolution against Great Britain. This fact, however, did not prevent the full force of American rapaciousness being turned on them. Their community experienced physical violence and privation, expropriation, division and extirpation, so that by the twentieth century only a handful of Oneidas remained in their homeland, clinging to tiny patches of unalienated land. The largest groups of Oneidas felt obligated to leave, and migrated to the West or to Canada. The elders and transmitters of culture and language thus became scattered, disunited, and discouraged, so that now there is only a tiny number of native speakers of Oneida, most of them elderly.

Recent decades, however, have seen a resurgence of interest among the Oneidas in their language and in cultural traditions. The three main communities – in New York State, the Province of Ontario, and the State of Wisconsin – have all embarked on significant programmes of language and culture retention and transmission. Increasing resources are being devoted to these projects, which are also increasingly sophisticated in their application of technology and pedagogy. It is an uphill battle nonetheless, since the forces that hold sway in the larger society work against it.

Overview of Oneida history

The Oneida Indians are one of the founding nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, or the Haudenosaunee, along with the Mohawks, the Onondagas, the Cayugas, and the Senecas, with the Tuscaroras joining in the eighteenth century (Tooker, 1978: 433).

The Haudenosaunee were among the most powerful of the North American peoples and dealing with them, in both friendly and unfriendly ways, was a significant element in the colonization process for the Dutch, French and English. Oneida territory originally included over 10,000 square miles, stretching through what is now the state of New York from the St. Lawrence River to the Susquehanna River.

After the outbreak of the American Revolution (1775-1783) the Grand Council of the Haudenosaunee could not reach consensus about a common response to the conflict. The Oneidas and the Tuscaroras generally fought on the side of the Americans, while the warriors of the other Iroquois nations tended to side with their former British allies. This resulted in turmoil within the structure of the Confederacy and ultimately to the end of Iroquois political independence. At the end of the war, two-thirds of the Iroquois population fled to Canada (Graymont, 1988: 87–89; Wallace, 1978: 443). This was especially true of those who had fought for the British, but even the Oneidas and Tuscaroras, who had supported the Americans, were robbed of nearly all their territory through a relentless process of theft, deceit and aggression that continued for more than a century.

The Oneidas had the misfortune of living astride the most effective passage through the Appalachian Mountains into the interior of the continent. New York's plans for economic growth were predicated on securing control over all Indian lands, but in particular the lands of the Oneidas. Between 1785 and 1842, New York State was involved in twenty-seven land transactions with Indians. Only two of these were with the permission of the federal government, whose laws and treaties promised protection against alienation of Oneida land (Locklear, 1999: 147).

The state played upon disunity among the Oneidas in a “divide and conquer” policy by using Christian missionaries to play the different factions against each other. A network of missionaries, land speculators, and state and federal government agents acted to achieve the goal through treaties and land transactions (Hauptman, 1995: 34–35; 1999a: 63–64; Horsman, 1999: 65).

These arrangements were of dubious legality, and some were out-and-out frauds. Typically agents of the state, or some land company acting under state approval, would seek out a few Oneidas who could be coaxed, threatened, or otherwise induced to sign their names to a document of sale. Most of the Oneidas involved could not read the document. They were not represented by their own counsel. They often did not even possess the land supposedly sold in the ‘treaty,’ and in any case, since land holding was communal in Oneida law, as individuals they had no right to sell it. The agents of New York, however, treated every one of these deals as completely legal and binding. (Johnsen, 2001: 7)

The Presbyterian missionary Samuel Kirkland, having started his career among the Oneidas in 1767, significantly shaped the course of their history until long after the end of the American Revolution. At his arrival, the Oneidas were divided into quarrelling factions. They had to struggle with massive problems such as famine, increasing pressure from land-hungry whites, crime, and alcoholism (Graymont, 1972: 33–37; Campisi, 1978: 481–483; Ronda, 1988: 24–26, 29; Lehman, 1990: 535). His trusting followers regarded him, ‘as a spiritual director, a guide in the midst of troubled times’ (Ronda, 1988: 24). In 1784, immediately following the conclusion of the Revolution, he advised the Oneidas not to cede any foot of their territory. Soon after, however, he became convinced that their religious conversion would be easier to achieve by selling their excessive territory (Lehman, 1990: 535–536).¹ Since he had established personal relations of trust with the Oneidas, his presence at six illegal state treaties gave them the appearance of legitimacy (Hauptman, 1999b: 44). In reality, the treaties, though he undoubtedly knew they were illegal, gave him the means of pursuing the “civilizing” strategy that he had evolved for the Oneidas, depriving them of land in order to force them to adopt the ways of encroaching American society. Personal gain for himself from the land transfers also clearly figured into Kirkland’s motives (Ronda, 1988: 24–26).

Eleazer Williams’s arrival in 1816 filled the Christian vacuum after Kirkland’s death. Williams was a lay reader for the Episcopal Church. Himself a Mohawk Indian, he could address the Oneidas in their own language, and in this way revitalized frustrated Christian converts. Yet his missionary work further split up the Oneidas and created a segmented community, allowing New York State to conclude treaties with separate Oneida factions.

The federal government faced increasing pressure for Indian removal in the decade after the War of 1812. Between 1800 and 1820 the white population of New York State increased from 589,051 to 1,372,812 people. The state had given the pre-emption rights for land to private land companies, whose owners, managers, and stockholders held social and political positions that allowed them to put pressure on the state and federal governments. After 1815, the Ogden Land Company assumed the leading role. David A. Ogden, as an elected Congressman in 1817, used his position to gain federal approval for the Iroquois Nations’ removal to the Green Bay area in what is now the State of Wisconsin. He found federal officials to lobby for his goal and created an alliance with Eleazer Williams, who had his own visions of a vast Indian

empire in the West under his religious leadership (Geier, 1980: 148–153; Horsman, 1999: 53–60; Hauptman, 1999a: 18–20, 147). With money from the land speculators, Williams was able to finance his journeys to explore the Green Bay region and initiated the Oneida immigration to this area. In 1830 missionaries from the Methodist Church convinced more Oneida converts to move to Wisconsin and many more did so for the next 50 years (Horsman, 1999: 65; Campisi, 1974: 133–134; Geier, 1980: 152, 159–160).

At the same time that New York State and land speculators were “legally” expropriating the Oneidas, their white neighbours carried out the process informally. Oneidas still today refer bitterly to the “two furrows a year rule”, whereby farmers whose land abutted Indian land would plow two additional furrows in their fields each year, gradually encroaching on the land of the Indians (Johnsen, 2001: 8). Yet one more unpleasant surprise was in store for the Oneidas: in 1843 New York enacted legislation requiring the division of tribal lands in severalty (again, without the required federal approval), which meant that land could be sold off piecemeal rather than a treaty being required.

Disgusted with the situation in New York State and despairing of any positive resolution, a group of 241 Oneidas sold their land in New York and acquired eight square miles of land in Canada. In three emigration waves between 1840 and 1845, they settled along the Thames River in Southwold, Ontario. By the middle of the nineteenth century, then, the Oneida Nation had become divided into at least three separate communities, all of which over the coming decades would face additional challenges to their social integrity.²

Land, casinos and community

In 1843, there were only two non-contiguous areas of Oneida land left in New York, totalling about 900 acres. The land base went through further reductions until by the twentieth century it was down to 32 acres (Campisi, 1974: 262–266, 404–408; 1978: 485). Fighting against all odds, however, the Oneidas pursued legal recourse for the return of or compensation for their lands. An Oneida woman, Mary Winder, searching for documents and writing petitions since the 1920s, proved to be the leading figure in the land claims proceedings. She travelled to Washington, Chicago, Wisconsin, and Canada to sustain Oneida land rights (Hauptman, 1986: 187–191, J. Chrisjohn, 1999:

142; Gleason, 1999: 3). ‘She had the dream to unify Oneida people on ancestral homelands’ (Shenandoah, 1996). After her death in 1954, her sister, Delia Cornelius Waterman, continued the efforts. Waterman adopted Jacob Thompson, her Mohawk son-in-law, into the Oneida community and provided him with all land claims materials. In the 1960s, he strengthened the alliances among the Oneidas, including those living in Wisconsin and Canada (Hauptman, 1986: 191–193).

Thompson contacted an attorney who cracked the vicious cycle of legal impediments that had bedeviled the Oneidas for years, and they brought suit to have land returned that had been taken in violation of federal law. In 1985 the US Supreme Court ruled that 300,000 acres had been taken illegally. The Court ordered that negotiations between New York State and the Oneidas proceed in order to determine a fair settlement of the claims, which it was assumed would include a combination of financial compensation for the loss and a return of some public land to the Oneidas. This was to involve representatives of the Canadian, Wisconsin and New York Oneidas. Negotiations, however, proceeded very slowly, and it soon became clear that the state was not negotiating seriously. It appears that the state’s strategy was to delay in the hope that eventually (as has happened) the composition of the Supreme Court would change to a panel less inclined to rule in favor of Indian land claims. In the meantime, two developments made the negotiation process even more difficult. First, the prospect of Oneidas regaining land spurred the development in the 1990s of a militant right-wing anti-Indian organization, Upstate Citizens United for Equality, that has put pressure on local and state politicians not to “give in” to Indian “demands”. Second, differences in opinions and strategies among the very strong personalities who lead the various Oneida groups have led to dissension among them to the point where they no longer cooperate in any legal matters, and find cooperation of any sort difficult. Land negotiations have now fallen apart entirely, and appear to be headed back to the US Supreme Court for further adjudication (Cooper, 2011).

Another recent development is the appearance of new sources of revenue, primarily in the form of casino gambling.³ Almost overnight, the Oneidas in both New York and Wisconsin have gone from poverty to very substantial wealth. This wealth has had a contradictory effect on the prospects of the Oneidas. On the one hand, it has meant that they have access to resources for housing, education, medical care, and cultural activity, which they could not have dreamed of a few decades ago. On the other hand, the money has further exacerbated the schisms between the separate

groups, and to some extent has aggravated factionalism within these groups. It has also enmeshed them in economic and political institutions of the wider economy that tend to work against tradition and community. Further, it has hardened the attitude of the state and the Oneidas' white neighbours, who see no reason to support land return or economic reparations for people with such wealth. The state has also used casino compacts as a means of encouraging intertribal competition and disunity (Schüler, 2011).

The 1,100 or so Oneidas who remain in New York live largely scattered throughout the central part of the State and the Mohawk River valley. Many live in the cities of Utica, Syracuse, and Oneida. The community now has two geographic foci. One is the 32-acre territory that was never alienated. It contains the longhouse (a ceremonial and political centre), a community building and a cultural centre, and nearby are the health centre, the children's and elders' centre, and the new housing of the Village of the White Pines. The other focus is the Turning Stone resort and casino, an impressive complex that rises like a skyscraper from the farmlands of central New York. The Oneida administrative and governmental offices are scattered in several locations throughout the area.

In Wisconsin, today about 16,500 individuals are enrolled in the Oneida Tribe of Wisconsin (Wisconsin State Tribal Relations Initiative, 2010a). This makes them three times larger than the other two Oneida groups combined. Most of them live on the reservation, though many live dispersed in cities throughout the Mid-West. The Wisconsin Oneida reservation is also inhabited by almost 18,000 non-Indians, a consequence of the allotment process, which allowed non-Indians to buy up Indian land (Wisconsin State Tribal Relations Initiative, 2010b).

The 4,000 Oneidas in Southwold, Ontario, live in a fairly tightly bounded area purchased by their ancestors. They have been able to maintain a community residentially segregated from non-Oneidas, but like their New York and Wisconsin kinsmen they are enmeshed in a complex economic and political network with the larger society.

Education and the undermining of community

Another factor that significantly influenced all three Oneida communities was education in boarding schools (in Canada, "residential schools") to which they, like

other Native American groups, sent their children, and were sometimes forced to send them.⁴ Historically the Oneidas were already accustomed to formal schooling. Samuel Kirkland had established the first school among them in the eighteenth century. When the Wisconsin community was established, for example, one of their first aims was to begin a school, which they did in the 1830s. By the 1870s there were four functioning schools among the Wisconsin Oneidas, and several individuals even attended a nearby university.

The boarding school system, on the other hand, was not an indigenous development, but was part of a ‘policy of aggressive civilization’ formulated and passed into law by the US Congress in 1869, followed by the Canadian authorities a decade later (Smith, 2001: 255ff). The idea of sending Indians to schools off the reservations in order to “soak” them in the “civilization” of, and to assimilate them to, the dominant society was strongly promoted by Captain Richard Henry Pratt, veteran of the American Civil War and the Indian wars in the West, who in 1879 founded the model Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Through his and others’ efforts the idea of wrenching Indian children from the reservations as the only way to give them chances to survive in modern American society came to dominate. Pratt was convinced that Native Americans were as capable of mastering the same skills and obtaining the same education as white students, if they were only given equal chances, but their allegiance to their traditional ways of life had to be sacrificed (Pratt, 2004).

Integral to Pratt’s concept of Indian schooling was that Indian children from different nations were to attend the same school, thus becoming a part of the “melting-pot” of the new American (Indian) identity (Bell, 1998: 38). Pratt, like many liberal activists of that period, believed that the great diversity of indigenous cultures and languages was an obstacle to ‘becoming a very part of the people of the country’ and that the Indian ‘must become capable of living among our people and taking care of himself and his own affairs’ (Pratt, 2004: 221–222). The main thrust of education in the boarding school was teaching Indian children how to read, write and speak English. Indian boys were also taught occupations like smithing, carpentry, farming; Indian girls were taught to sew, and to work in the kitchen and laundry (Utley, 2004: xxii–xxiii; Hauptman, 2006: 19). Christian denominations took part in the everyday functioning of the schools (Smith, 2001: 254).

Indian boarding schools were founded all over United States (24 by 1900) and there were over 50 in Canada (see Miller, 1996: 121). ‘By 1900 three-quarters of all

Indian children were enrolled in boarding school, with approximately a third of this number in off-reservation schools ... Many of those attending reservation boarding schools would eventually move on to off-reservation institutions' (Adams, 2004: xii). Oneidas from Wisconsin and New York were among the largest groups of Indians at Pratt's school in Carlisle (Hauptman, 2006: 116). In 1933 the American New Deal of the Franklin Roosevelt administration significantly changed policy towards Indians, acknowledging the uniqueness and value of their cultures, but boarding schools continued until the 1960s.

Although these schools were disruptive of Oneida culture, their legacy is more complex and mixed, as is revealed by the memories of the people who attended them (Adams, 1995: 209–269; Lewis, 2005; Lomawaima, 1993). On the one hand, the schools aimed at assimilating Indians into American or Canadian society according to the principle expressed by Pratt, 'kill the Indian, save the man' (Hauptman, 2008a). Part of this civilizing education was to discourage or forbid children to speak their native language. Lloyd Schuyler remembered that he was punished at the boarding school for errors he made while trying to speak English: 'when I'd see the number eleven [the teacher was showing two fingers] I didn't know how to say [eleven]. I'd see two marks there. And I'd hate when Winnebago [Indian] kids laughed at me' (Hlebowicz, 2002: 7A).

Andrew Beechtree, an Oneida, returned to the Wisconsin Oneida reservation after several years spent in Carlisle, educated, proud, and with high self-esteem, 'expecting to be welcomed back with open arms' (Lewis, 2005: 309). The people greeted him in the Oneida language, but he answered in English.

I didn't notice at first, but soon it flashed on me that they were talking broken English. But imagine our surprise when they started using their native tongue and I couldn't understand but a few words of it. In fact, it sounded so strange to me that it was comical. And if it was comical to me to hear them talk native, it was a scream to hear me try to talk it. The meaning of the Oneida words I learned came back gradually, but to converse or talk in Oneida – it was beyond my poor power to master. (Lewis, 2005: 309)

He explains that it is enough to make a small mistake in pronouncing an Oneida word to change its meaning in such a way that it 'would not be nice to say in public. After few embarrassing experiences I decided that I could get along better if I left the making of speeches in Oneida to someone else' (Lewis, 2005: 309–310).

Dennison Wheelock, a distinguished Oneida student of Carlisle and afterwards of other boarding schools, who received national fame for his accomplishments a band conductor, composer and cornet soloist, in 1887, just two years after arrival to Carlisle,

published a controversial article in which he ridiculed the teaching of Indian languages. Successful in following the white man's path, he was alienated from his own community and after his death was not even buried among his fellow Oneidas on the reservation, but in a white cemetery in Green Bay (Landis, 2006: 51; Hauptman, 2006; Hauptman, 2008a). Indeed, many of the "boarding school" Indians adopted the notion propagandized during their education that the tight-knit nature of their home communities and their reservations were obstacles to the civilization of their people (Hauptman, 2010: 200–202). This was indeed a decisive period that broke intratribal ties and the natural language transmission among the most Native American communities.

On the other hand, boarding schools initiated something Pratt and other educators neither planned nor wished for: the growing sense of pan-Indian identity among students coming from different tribes which would act against the assimilationist objectives of the white reformers (Hauptman, 2008a: 26). Many other aspects of the boarding school experience seem to have been generally positive. Wisconsin Oneida children attending the Oneida Boarding School founded on their own reservation (as fulfillment of their own goal to have such a school) as well as boarding schools off the reservation (Cornelius, 2006: 68), took pride in getting an education, and participated in the schools' athletic and musical activities as well as various clubs and societies (Hauptman, 2008a; Lewis, 2005: 406–407; Adams, 2006). They were also able to earn money themselves thanks to the so-called "outing system" – seasonally living with and working for white families all over the country and returning to school after summer (Adams, 2006; Landis, 2005: 51–53). They could also live with a white family closer to the school and work before and after classes every day. There were cases when leaving school and returning home "touched the very heart" of students who had lived there several years, made friends with other Indians, and experienced their early loves there. One of the former pupils recalled, 'life at the school was good compared to home ... I hear they forbade our language at these schools, but it didn't affect me since I didn't know my language. The Winnebago and Sioux people spoke their language in small groups at the school and yet no one bothered them at the time [1930s]' (Metoxen, 2006: 84).

The first residential school in the Oneida community in Southwold, Ontario, was established in the 1840s, three years after their arrival, under the direction of the Wesleyan Missionary Society. Antone (2006: 71) reports that, 'in the early years, the

people of this new community recognized the necessity that their children should learn to read, write and do arithmetic'. The first teacher was an Oneida, Abraham Sickles, who taught all the subjects, in Oneida (Antone, 2006: 71), but this changed to a white teacher after a couple of years. The children could also attend the Mount Elgin Indian Residential School, which opened in December 1849 on the neighbouring Chippewa Indian reserve, and other residential schools as far away as Manitoba (Antone, 2006). The Canadian policy towards Indian education, like in the US, was assimilation, so Oneida language teaching was not a desired part of schooling. The older Oneidas interviewed in the 1990s by Antone (1996: 124) and in 2002–2003 by B. Hlebowicz recall being punished for speaking their language at school (even in a day-school on the reserve). They did not want the same to happen to their children so many of them decided not to pass on knowledge of the language (Antone, 1996: 124–126).

The Canadian Indian Act of 1951 called for integration of Indian children into public schools, and Oneida students were brought to schools in London, Ontario, by buses. In 1973 that policy was reversed, with a programme of 'Indian Control of Indian Education' (Antone, 1996: 119–120). However, the attitude of the parents, already accustomed to the idea of non-Indian education for their children, was such that some of them would not send their children to the reserve-based Standing Stone School when Oneida language instruction was introduced there. They perceived the Oneida language as 'irrelevant and useless; it would not help the children learn to get a job' (Antone, 1996: 124–125). Harry Doxtator, former chairman of elective council and now council member, recalled in 2002:

My grandparents and parents were threatened [if they used their] language at school ... During summer they came back home and used the language. The problem was that my generation kind of stopped; my parents didn't use the language as much at home as they did between their parents. But as I visited my grandparents, they always did use the language; I guess I just didn't get enough of it to carry it over. I understand the language, not totally, but some of it. ... when I was first time in the council, they used language pretty much all the time. It only lasted for two terms. But then the council was getting younger and younger and with my generation it is kind of rare. (Interviewed by B. Hlebowicz, December 2002)

In more recent years, in both Wisconsin and Ontario, the Oneidas have developed their own schooling programmes oriented toward cultural preservation. (The New York Oneidas are too dispersed for this to be practical for them.) One of the goals of these indigenous schools has been language preservation. The Turtle School on the Wisconsin Oneida reservation opened in 1994. Today 331 students attend, down from 500 at the beginning (Hlebowicz *et al.*, 2004: 14). The school is run by the Tribe, and

supported with the gaming revenues from the casino on the reservation as well as by the Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs. In addition to the standard schooling on the elementary and middle school level, the school offers cultural and language instructions. The teachers, although most are not fluent Oneida speakers, keep learning the language themselves and during the classes they try to use it as much as possible, together with teaching about older Oneida traditions. The teaching at the Turtle School is based on the basic elements of the Haudenosaunee heritage: life cycle ceremonies, the Great Law of Peace, and *Kaiwi-yo*, the teachings of a Seneca prophet, Handsome Lake, who at the turn of eighteenth century reformed the older religion (Hlebowicz *et al.*, 2004). Other non-Christian elements of Turtle school education include morning recitation of the Iroquois Thanksgiving prayer. In each class every week or every month the students choose a “chief”, a “clan mother” and a “runner” among themselves, which are references to positions that existed in Iroquoian societies in the past. Thus, teaching of the language is combined with cultural instructions, including maintaining a garden outside the school where the traditional “three sisters” (maize, squash, and beans) are cultivated, as well as participation in the longhouse.

The attitude of the students towards learning the unfamiliar language, which is only used in certain limited spheres of their lives, varies. One of the former teachers at the tribal high school said, ‘some kids really picked the language up, but others didn’t show interest at all, or even showed dislike; some of the kids didn’t find it useful and they kind of expressed it to me. Maybe they were just being honest. A lot of kids didn’t want to learn it,’ which is clearly a reflection of the children’s sense of its lack of relevance to their lives (interviewed by B. Hlebowicz, 9 September 2002).

Among the Canadian Oneidas, the tribal Standing Stone School holds Oneida language lessons apart from the regular curriculum. Traditionally-oriented people, however, felt the need to revitalize the language more directly and, together with it, the Oneida culture and world-view, understood as the “longhouse” culture, with its community values such as cooperation and responsibility.⁵ A new “learning place” was opened in 1986 called *Tsi Niyukwaliho:t^*, which means ‘the place where they teach “our ways”’ (Poulette, 2003: 136; Hlebowicz *et al.*, 2004: 17). It does not have much in common with standard education, and it should be viewed as alternative education or a survival school. An effort is made to teach the Thanksgiving Address in Oneida, proper ceremonial vocabulary, and proper conduct in longhouse ceremonies. Much of the instruction occurs outside of the school facility, including picking berries that are

called “medicines”, learning about plants, or constructing traditional crafts like water drums or turtle rattles. As Howard Elijah, the founder and director of the school said, the language, ceremonies, and ancient practices build ‘the substance of Oneida identity’ (interviewed by B. Hlebowicz, 4 December 2002). The curriculum is ‘set by the moons’, according to Elijah: the seasons dictate community agricultural activities and thanksgiving ceremonies, and the school tries to inculcate this knowledge in the students. There have been also been attempts to teach the language to the parents. In Elijah’s words, ‘in order to retain the language, both the children and the parents need to learn it so that there is continuity between the home and the school to make *Onyotara:ka* a living language that carries the significance, magnificence, and the spirit of the people’.

The school does not have many students (perhaps two dozen), and just a couple of instructors. It faces several problems. For example, due to internal friction within the community someone burned it down once in 2005. Some parents have taken their children away from the school because the children tell them that they want to learn to write and read, which indicates that these basic elements of education are not provided there at a satisfactory level (community member, e-mail to B. Hlebowicz, February 2007). Although the small group of instructors feels responsibility for the whole Oneida community, they seem to be of the opinion that only traditional “longhouse” culture is adequate for Oneidas. One of the clan mothers, raised by her grandparents, who attended both the church and the longhouse growing up, now says that she would feel uncomfortable going to the church (interview by B. Hlebowicz, 8 December 2002). Another member of the community, raised in a Christian family, said that when she approached the “traditionalists” to learn about the longhouse, they ridiculed her. Among Christian Oneidas you can hear disparaging opinions about the longhouse people: ‘they’re pagans’.

The history of Oneida language preservation efforts

Given the history of the US government in the destruction of the Oneida community and its language, ironically one of the most important steps in the preservation of the language was a result of federal governmental action, the start of the Oneida Language and Folklore Project in 1939, part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a New Deal programme during the administration of Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s.

This development occurred among the Wisconsin Oneidas, who were the most influenced by Christian missionaries and the most open to the values of the dominant society. This orientation may paradoxically have led this Oneida community to contribute more than the ones in New York and Canada toward the development of linguistic resources for the future, since they were comfortable with, and could see the value of, working with linguists and anthropologists. The idea to apply for federal money to study the Oneida language came from Morris Swadesh, a linguistic anthropologist at the University of Wisconsin. With the help of one Oneida student and with the use of one Oneida text published by Franz Boas in 1909, Swadesh and his university students attempted to write Oneida in phonetic transcription in order to learn the sound system of the language and then its structure, creating in effect a new alphabet and orthography. Then Swadesh's student, Floyd Lounsbury taught this Oneida alphabet to a team of Oneidas. After a two-week training period, they collected short stories in the Oneida language from other community members. These were typed and translated into English word-for-word. This material allowed Lounsbury and the Oneidas to immerse themselves in the work of deciphering Oneida morphology and to start building a dictionary (Lounsbury, 1988: 131–134; Hauptman, 1981: 164–176; Lewis, 2005: xxxii–xxxvii).

Of course, the Oneidas – who were already losing their native tongue by the 1930s – did not start speaking the Oneida language again on an everyday basis. Still, the project, together with another similar one that followed immediately, the Oneida Ethnological Study, brought astonishing results. First, it gave the Oneida community, at least the Oneidas in Wisconsin, a sense of unity, as ‘nearly every adult member of the community contributed a story to the project’ (Hauptman, 1981: 173). The extensive material produced a broad picture of a Native American people in transition (Lewis, 2005: xxxv–xxxvii). A particular and important outcome of the project was the publishing in 1941 of the Oneida hymnal, which has been very popular and much used to the present (Hauptman, 1981: 175–176).

From 1974 to 1985, thanks to federal funding, the Oneida Bilingual Program was conducted. It was a revival and continuation of the earlier WPA projects (Clark, 1988: 139). For the first time Oneida language and culture were introduced to the local public schools and were taught 10 to 15 minutes a day. Many stories gathered during the Oneida Language and Folklore Project, so far existing only in a written version, were read by Oneida speakers and taped, and now they are being archived for future

generations and used for an online dictionary (Abbott, 2010: 41–42). They were also illustrated and published in Oneida and English versions. A set of tapes was issued, which included a transcription of the material of the second WPA project. The materials have recently been digitized and edited, and are accessible on the internet. They are used as teaching materials for elementary school-aged children (Clifford Abbott, e-mail to B. Hlebowicz, 6 December 2010).

Also in the 1970s a nearby university began offering Oneida language instruction as a credit-bearing curriculum. Potential Oneida language teachers can also obtain certification at the university to be able to teach Oneida (Cornelius and Jourdan, 2010; A. Chrisjohn, 1988). About the same time, the WPA collections were indexed to make them more usable, together with allotment records for family genealogy research. These are tools for the teachers in tribal schools who want to develop curricula for their students to conduct research on the Oneida language as well as family and tribal history (Oneida member Susan Daniels, e-mail to B. Hlebowicz, 29 November 2010). In the mid-1990s language instructors used the WPA stories to direct plays in the Oneida language.

Part of the language revival in Wisconsin in the 1970s was the Native American Language Project, based at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. From 1973 to 1976 individuals from the Oneida tribe and four other Indian communities in the state recorded native words, phrases and stories. One of the results of the project was the publication of the *Oneida Language Manual* (Hinton, Philbrick and Sandoval, 1981). In the 1980s the Oneida language became a constant part of the curriculum at the Oneida Tribal School. Another tribal school on the reservation, the Oneida Nation High School, starting in 1994, introduced obligatory four-year classes of the Oneida language and culture. Currently there are 79 students and seven Oneida language teachers. In 1994 the Oneida Business Committee passed a resolution declaring Oneida the official language of the Oneida Nation (Cornelius and Jourdan, 2010), though this has little practical significance. In 2003 the tribe established the Oneida Language Charter Team composed of 13 individuals. The aim of this body is to prepare a long-range strategy of full reintroduction of the Oneida language to all Oneida people (Krejci, 2004).

In 1996, 30–35 individuals took part in a six-week semi-immersion language session in which Oneidas learned how to teach the language. This included elders knowledgeable in the language who were coupled with the younger people wanting to

learn and teach the language (Susan Daniels, e-mail to B. Hlebowicz, 29 November 2010). The same year the Oneida Language Center (*Tekalu.tatu*) was established on the reservation, and has functioned as a kind of laboratory with elders fluent in Oneida and language instructors. Some of them have specialized in learning and teaching the religious vocabulary used at the ceremonies in the Oneida longhouse (Randy Cornelius, interviewed by B. Hlebowicz, 12 September 2002).

One of the founders of the (Wisconsin) Oneida elementary school in 1980 and later the Turtle School in 1994 was Maria Hinton, a woman devoted to preserving Oneida language and culture, and the co-author of the 1996 dictionary that used the Oneida Language and Folklore Project stories (Abbott *et al.*, 1996). Recently she has accomplished the enormous task of recording all the dictionary entries into a computer programme, making the pronunciation of all of them available online. Professor Clifford Abbott (e-mail to B. Hlebowicz, 7 December 2010) also holds a university class at the Turtle School each semester, and it typically enrolls 15 to 20 non-Indian university students, and sometimes participants from the community. The website, created at the University at Green Bay, contains resources to learn Oneida. On the same page one can also listen to some of the stories collected during the Oneida Language and Folklore Project, read by the next generation of Oneida speakers, as well as study the 165-page Oneida Teaching Grammar.

As impressive and important as these developments have been, the use of the Oneida language continues to decline precipitously. As Randy Cornelius, a language teacher from Wisconsin, puts it:

Our tribal school has been in existence for 31 years now and it hasn't produce one single [fluent] speaker. Most children that go through our school system have an understanding of the ceremonies and basic vocabulary but don't use it in the community. There are a couple of families that do use the language in the home with their children but none of them are fluent. It's been over 90 years since our children's first language was Oneida. It'll be a miracle when this happens again. (E-mail to B. Hlebowicz, 6 December 2010)

According to members of the New York Oneidas interviewed by J. Johnsen in 2010, there are no fluent speakers of the Oneida language left in New York. Interviewees reported that in their own families, parents stopped teaching their children to speak Oneida several decades ago, though many older people can remember extensive usage in the household as they were growing up. Since the New York Oneidas have lived in a dispersed fashion for so long, there has been no basis for a community life that was mediated by their native language, nor have they been able to make any attempt to operate their own schools in which the language might have

been the medium for instruction. As Hinton (2010) points out, this is the case for many Native groups in North America:

While it is the dream of many people involved in language revitalization to see a new generation of native speakers, the parent generation, who sincerely desire the language for their children ... do not speak their heritage language themselves, and cannot take on the task of passing the language on to their children at home. Thus second-language learning becomes the center of language revitalization. (Hinton, 2010: 38)

Recently, however, the New York Oneidas have taken significant steps towards the second-language learning that is a necessary precondition for the recovery of their language. Using resources and teachers from Wisconsin and Ontario, classes have been organized under earnest and competent leadership. The Oneida Nation has contracted with Berlitz to develop an immersion system, according to Sherri Beglan (interviewed by J. Johnsen October 2010). The Nation has articulated the extraordinary goal of teaching the Oneida language to the entire enrolled membership and, using the wealth generated by casino revenues, has begun to invest heavily towards this end. One programme involves helping members to stay focused on the language by paying them a salary that allows them to leave their jobs, turning learning the language into full-time employment. Only a few have taken advantage of this yet, and still fewer have persisted. Several adult students, however, interviewed by J. Johnsen (October 2010), were quite clearly thrilled with how far they had come. Still largely at the level of simple sentences and conversations, they nonetheless described how they are beginning to work with the children in the day care centre and how they worked in a disciplined fashion to speak Oneida to their own children at home. An informal conversation has also opened up with a local college to explore offering Oneida for academic credit.

Only in Canada has a community been sustained that is fluent in Oneida. The Canadian Oneidas, conservative in their values, had the fortunate circumstance of not having to submit to land allotment, and they have never allowed whites to settle on their lands. This allowed them to maintain an intact, Oneida-centred community for much longer than the other groups. In a fish and chips restaurant in St. Thomas, a small town near the Southwold reserve, in winter 2002 B. Hlebowicz witnessed the Oneida language in action. The restaurant was full of older people, the majority of whom were Oneidas. Robert Doxtator, an older fluent speaker of the language, in a jovial way greeted other people in Oneida and engaged them in conversation, and the Oneida language could be heard being spoken at other tables as well. Such a scene is unlikely

in any other place outside the Southwold reserve and area. Even there, however, it is becoming a rare thing, for while there are more native speakers of Oneida in Southwold than in New York and Wisconsin combined, nonetheless native speakers are few (probably about 100) and are mostly elderly. In Canada, too, the people are becoming concerned, and not just about language but about the whole array of cultural features that they see as mediated by language. Since at the longhouse ceremonies only the Oneida language is used, many people in all three Oneida groups do not understand what exactly is being said. An Oneida longhouse person from Wisconsin (interviewed by B. Hlebowicz, 9 September 2002) suggested that people attend anyway, understanding the context ('they have general understanding'), but among New York Oneidas sometimes it stops people from participating. They ask how they can take part in something that they do not understand, and how they can give thanks for something when they do not know what it is (Hlebowicz, 2009: 140).

Challenges and opportunities

In North America, 'English is the hegemonic language. It has overcome indigenous languages, first through forcible education, and ultimately by its economic power. The loss of Native American languages as people's first languages is almost complete' (Hinton, 2010: 36). Among the Oneidas, as among so many Indian groups, the fragmentation of their people, the loss of their land base, and the destruction of indigenous community life hastened this process. As Hinton (2010: 40) notes, 'language death ultimately involves people who know the language ceasing to speak it'. Despite great resilience and resistance, at a certain point the energy and discipline necessary to sustain the language and its transmission to a younger generation flagged among the Oneidas. Today the language is not known or used by a large number of people in any of the three communities. There are perhaps 100 fluent speakers in Canada, no more than ten in Wisconsin and none in New York (Michelson and Doxtator, 2002: 1).

It is important to note that this is a state of affairs that did not just happen as an accident of history. Rather it is the result of the social, cultural and political goals, prejudices, and ethos of the dominant Euro-American societies of the US and Canada. If the policies that grew out of this ethos have varied from time to time and place to place, they have nonetheless been constantly animated by and directed towards one

overriding end: the obliteration of sovereign Indian nations. In the instance of the Oneidas, those policies have taken numerous forms: disruptive missionary activity, quasi-legal and illegal taking of land, failure to allow the Oneidas to pursue redress through the courts, the lack of will by the US Congress and the Canadian central government to safeguard Oneida rights, active abetting of the division of the Oneidas into far-flung separate communities, allotment of land, removal and boarding schools.

Constant efforts by Oneida elders, social projects like the WPA, and the diligent linguistic studies of anthropologists have kept the potential of language survival alive, however, and have produced an impressive base of resources for teaching and learning the language. Both Canadian and Wisconsin groups run schools where the youngest generation can at least be exposed to the language. Individuals among New York Oneidas strive to improve their knowledge and efficiently teach the language to others. The language exists, then, although not as a spoken mother tongue of the people. It is used during the longhouse ceremonies, in prayers, or “ornamentally” in everyday situations, like e-mail correspondence when Oneida expressions meaning “hello,” “how are you?” or “thank you” are used.

Examination of the efforts so far allows us to draw several conclusions. (1) The use of the language during ceremonies has contributed to the sense of Oneida identity and to some degree to the preservation of the language. On the other hand, the ceremonies have little practical effect on most Oneidas’ lives and, in any case, the members of all the Oneida communities have demonstrated that it is possible to participate in the ceremonies without understanding what is being said. (2) While the school programmes are creative and the result of great effort, they have been extremely limited in their effects. There are insufficient numbers of fluent teachers, and moreover the instruction is so limited in duration and frequency that it is easily compartmentalized by students, just another one of many subjects they study. (3) While these results have been disappointing, the efforts of the Oneidas have nonetheless produced an impressive array of resources – curricula, dictionaries, grammars, narratives, recordings – that constitute a bulwark against complete language loss.

As Fishman (1980: 171) argues, however, ‘stable bilingualism and biculturalism cannot be maintained on the basis of open and unlimited interaction of minorities and majorities’. The minority community must have the ability to control ‘its own residential and economic bases’, and to regulate ‘the domains and degrees of

interaction with Angloamerica'. At the very least the community needs to have sufficient control over the education of its youth to maintain immersion schools or similar means of language training. But all the language training in the world will not matter if the language is not used. Whether the Oneidas can now organize their lives and their resources to create the kind of community life and continuity that will undergird language survival remains to be seen. This would require a level of commitment to a shared life and a level of political cooperation that are not currently in evidence.

Interestingly, the process of reviving their language seems to have much better chance of uniting Oneidas than any political agreement among their various governments. The Oneida teachers from Wisconsin who now work at the Turtle School were told to go to Southwold to learn about ceremonies and the Great Law of Peace and live with the traditionally oriented part of that community. The aim was 'to practice the culture' (Hlebowicz, *et al.*, 2004: 13 and cf). In the 1997 immersion programme on the Wisconsin reservation there were fluent speakers from both the Canadian and the New York groups. 'They came and helped us; that was something really good', recalls one of the Oneida educators (interviewed by B. Hlebowicz, 9 September 2002). The Wisconsin Oneidas organize large conferences held in their Turtle School, and although most of the scholars and Oneida educators participating deal with Wisconsin Oneida issues, members of Canadian and New York communities attend also. New York Oneidas hire language teachers from the Canadian community to staff their language instruction programme.

As difficult as it is to hang on to it, facing a future without their language is much more difficult for most Oneidas to contemplate. Increasing numbers have come to the conclusion that their lives, their children's lives, and the life of the larger global community, will be richer for the continued robust presence of the Oneida language. A recurrent theme of most American Indian cultures is an orientation for political action and planning that projects forward into the distant future, as the Iroquois say, 'for seven generations to come'. While the marketplace is full of kitschy Indian lore and sayings of pseudo-profundity, nonetheless as Hauptman (2008b: xxi) argues, the Iroquois invocation of concern for seven generations in the future is 'not just slick politics' or 'mere shibboleths', but a clear statement of the real sense of responsibility the community and its leaders feel that they have to future generations. Despite the pessimistic assessment of Forrest Brooks quoted at the beginning of this article, should

the Oneidas cease to speak their language, they will not cease to be Oneidas. The efforts to preserve the language are, in fact, reflections of the deep-seated sense of identity still felt by them despite their centuries-long history of dispersal and loss. These efforts at language preservation have, however, in turn contributed to a greater consciousness of the importance of their Oneida identity in their lives.

Notes

- 1 Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many self-designated “friends” of Indians saw the common ownership of land by native peoples as an impediment to their economic and moral development.
- 2 The situation was yet more complex in that a number of Oneidas also settled on the Six Nations Reserve in Canada, while others lived dispersed with other Iroquois groups in New York.
- 3 A quirk of US law makes it feasible for Indians to run casinos that whites are barred from owning. This is because the laws regulating gambling are state laws, but except through special provision, Indians are subject only to federal law.
- 4 Schools for indigenous peoples were founded by various Christian denominations, both in the US and Canada, as early as the seventeenth century. On the history of the residential schools in Canada see Miller, 1996; on boarding schools for Indians in the US see Trafzer *et al.* 2006; Adams 1995.
- 5 Learning the language is such a responsibility. See, for instance, the opinion of one of the younger Oneidas devoted to learning the language, expressed in her masters thesis:
I am part of the wolf clan ... The wolf clan is responsible for guiding the people ... More specifically, I am a descendent from the wolf title, *Kanuhkwe'niyo*. This title and its descendants are said to have the responsibility of looking after provisions and sustenance for the people. We ... need to ensure that the people are provided for. This is not limited to food but to anything that the *Onyota'a:ka* people need such as our language. (Poulette, 2003: 20)

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