

No Indian can claim to be full-blooded

Published on 12/18/2002

To the Editor of The Day:

Delphine Red Shirt's recent column in The Hartford Courant condemning mixed-blood Connecticut tribes as somehow being 'less than Indian' brings into the light of day a sad fact among American Indian tribes—the scourge of intertribal prejudice by some Indians against Native Americans of mixed blood.

Many Natives of large tribes, who have not had to face the reality of the horrors inbreeding can cause, choose to ignore this reality in favor of their own perception of who should be considered an Indian and who should not.

For instance, in my own Salinan tribe in Central California, outmarriage is and has always been our custom, to avoid having to marry too closely.

There are many Indians in California who, despite being labeled “full-blooded” by the BIA, have the blood of four or more tribes in their veins. And there's nearly always somebody who claims to be a full-blood but who has at least one European ancestor hiding in her closet.

In fact, what the large tribes don't want you to know is that they cannot claim to be “full-blooded” any more than can just about any of the coastal tribes who were severely affected by both the small size of their pre-contact communities and the European incursions on their land. Many of the Plains tribes routinely captured or purchased wives from neighboring tribes; and it's no coincidence that so many Sioux people have French surnames.

It is true that there are Americans with a drop or two of Indian blood who try to take advantage of that fact to get scholarships or other considerations from the government. We call them “wannabes.” However, most mixed-blooded Native Americans live in their traditional communities, practice their ancient ceremonies, know who they are and where they came from, and/or contribute to their local Native communities—all markers of “real Indians.”

Blood quantum is an invention of the United States government, not of Native Americans. Racial purity went out with the Nazis. And Native Americans should know better than to play the blood card, lest the government play it on them. ■

Debra Utacia Krol
Phoenix, Ariz.