

Ohero:kon - Under the Husk

VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE



Top: A Ohero:kon wood-burned book made by Tuscarora WoodWorks. Photo by Jessica Sargent.

Above: After four days of fasting, the Ohero:kon youth return to their community by canoe. Photo by Krystal Blue Photography.

Right: Kasennakohe and Kaienkwinehtha on the day of their return from their fourth fast. Photo by Krystal Blue Photography.



Program Synopsis

Ohero:kon - Under the Husk is a documentary that follows two Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) girls on their challenging journey to becoming women. Kaienkwinehtha and Kasennakohe are childhood friends from traditional families living in the Mohawk Community of Akwesasne that straddles the U.S./Canada border. They both take part in a four-year adolescent passage rites ceremony called Ohero:kon "Under the Husk" that has been revived in their community.

The girls choose aunts to mentor them and attend traditional teachings with them. Each spring they accept the responsibility to fast by themselves in a small lodge in the woods. There, they stay by themselves with no food or water for one day the first year, two the second and so on until the last year when they must complete four days of fasting. This ceremony challenges them spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically. It helps to shape the women they become.

In Their Words

"There's a difference between shaming a young girl into her physical transformation versus celebrating her."

— Louise Herne,
Mohawk Clanmother (Bear Clan)



Map of Akwesasne and St. Regis Mohawk Tribe land along the border of the U.S. and Canada.

Producer's Comment



Katsitsionni Fox

In our Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) community of Akwesasne we were able to revive our rites of passage ceremony for our youth even though it had not been practiced for generations.

We call this ceremony Ohero:kon, which means "under the husk."

The corn is a metaphor for the youth that are meant to be protected by the husk until they are grown.

We started with seven youth, and in just ten years there were more than 80 youth with Ohero:kon branching out to sister communities as well.

The women and men in our community were called upon to be aunts and uncles to these young people

and guide them through a transition we had never experienced ourselves. We learned with them and were amazed by how this ceremony awakened their gifts and strengthened their spirits.

I knew early on that something profound was happening, and that is was going to change our community forever. I felt compelled to document and share this story, and I did so through the eyes of two Mohawk girls making their transition into women.

There are so few films that reflect the true strength and beauty of our young people, especially our young women. It is important for us to be in the driver seat of these stories of hope and empowerment that are unfolding in Native communities across Turtle Island.

By the Numbers

1. The Mohawk people of Akwesasne refer to themselves as Kanien'kehá:ka, which means "People of the Flint."
2. Approximately 30 percent of the people of Akwesasne still speak Kanien'kehá:ka, their original language. The Akwesasne Freedom School is a Mohawk Immersion school that teaches all subjects in the Mohawk Language.
3. The population of the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation is 11,000 with approximately 1,800 Mohawks living off the territory.
4. The territory of Akwesasne is about 14,648 acres of undisputed lands excluding the territorial waters. However, the total land base is 26,359 acres due to unresolved land claims with ongoing legal proceedings.
5. Akwesasne existed prior to the borders of the United States and Canada that now intersect the community.
6. The Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) are one of Six Nations that make up the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.
7. Akwesasne is at the confluence of several small rivers as well as the St. Lawrence River. The early people were active traders with other tribes as well as the fur traders.
8. Clan mothers are traditional leaders who have the responsibility of choosing the chiefs and taking care of the clan names.



Ohero:kon girls at Mohawk Nation Longhouse after painting their canvas. Photo by Katsitsionni Fox.



The girls gather for the Ohero:kon Ceremony in 2015. Photo by Krystal Blue Photography.

Discussion Questions

1. Kaienkwinehtha and her friend moved from the Akwesasne Freedom School to a mainstream High School. What do you think she meant when she said it was the first time she experienced “pressure to be someone that I wasn’t.” Consider your own life. When have you experienced a similar pressure? How did you handle it?
2. *Under the Husk* is the story of how the Mohawk people reconstructed a youth rite of passage initiation and ritual that had been lost to them. What do you believe they saw happening to their youth that made them decide that such a ritual was important and necessary in order for their youth to become healthy adults and community members? What behaviors and activities do you see young people across cultures engage in that are similar?
3. There are many elements that are brought together within the Ohero:kon four-year initiation and rite of passage ceremony. The Elders considered these important in order for the initiation ritual to be successful in helping youth. What are some of those elements and why do you think they are important?
4. In the film, Louise Wakerakatste Herne says that “there is a difference between shaming a young girl into her physical transformation versus celebrating her.” Drawing from mainstream American culture or your own culture, give specific examples that exemplify both “shaming” and “celebrating” young people. What do you think other cultures could learn from the Kanien’kehá:ka Ohero:kon ceremony?
5. Although it is the young people who must go through the rigorous preparation for the fast each year, explore and discuss how the whole community is involved in these activities. How do you think this ritual benefits the whole community, from the little ones to the Elders?

Suggested Activities

1. Two important elements of the Ohero:kon ceremony are cultural teachings and fasting alone in nature. Research other cultures and identify three to four initiation or rite of passage rituals that are done in other Native American communities or global cultures. Outline the main tasks or activities that are involved to complete the initiation.
2. With the information gathered above, compare and contrast these rituals with the Ohero:kon ceremony. What are the common elements? What elements are unique to a single culture? Why do you think each of these elements was thought to be important to the Elders? Be specific.
3. The goal of the Ohero:kon initiation and rite of passage ceremony is to prepare the young people for life, strengthen their sense of personal identity and to awaken them to the larger spiritual world. What are the signs we see in the modern world that indicate not all young people are successfully making this passage from childhood to adulthood. Be specific.
4. Sweeping historical changes have put Native American languages at risk. In *Under the Husk* the Kanien’kehá:ka community is working hard to ensure that their language stays strong and alive. Research the many ways that both the Mohawks and other Native American Nations are re-invigorating and strengthening the common use of their original languages.
5. Some important elements of the Ohero:kon ritual are having mentor aunties/uncles, learning cultural teachings and fasting alone in nature. If you were asked to construct or reconstruct an initiation and rite of passage ceremony for young people within your own culture, what would it consist of? Describe the elements that you would incorporate within your ritual.



Ohero:kon girls sit on a canvas they painted for sweatlodge. Each girl sits on her painted section. Photo by Katsitsionni Fox.

Resources

About the film

www.underthehuskfilm.com

About Akwesasne

Cultural Portrait

<http://www.akwesasne.ca/sites/default/files/pdf/culturalportrait2nd.pdf>

History and Demographics

<http://www.akwesasne.ca/about>

http://www.srmt-nsn.gov/government/culture_and_history

Patterns of Health and Wellbeing: An Intercultural Symposium

03: Ohero:kon

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bp_AqmyviNw
SmithsonianNMAI presentation

Source of Map

<http://blogs.mcgill.ca/humanrightsinterns/files/2014/08/st-regis-map.jpg>



Ohero:kon youth fasters and their mentor aunties in 2015. Photo by Krystal Blue Photography.



The fasting lodge that the Ohero:kon youth spent their days in. Photo by Katsitsionni Fox.

TWO ROW PRODUCTIONS

All content in this Viewer Discussion Guide may be reproduced in whole or in part for educational use.

Ohero:kon - Under the Husk is a co-production of Two Row Productions LLC and Vision Maker Media with major funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).



This Viewer Discussion Guide was developed by Jamie Lee, an author and former instructor at the Oglala Lakota College, where she taught for five years. Lee has a Master's in Human Development and has been a communications trainer and an educator for the past 30 years. Her stories and articles have appeared in *The South Dakota Review*, *Winds of Change Magazine* and several other anthologies. She has published three non-fiction books along with one novel and a collection of writings from Oglala Lakota College students. Her first novel, *Washaka: The Bear Dreamer*, was a PEN USA finalist in 2007. Lee has written over 70 documentary programs including Public Radio's landmark 52-part Native music series, *Oyate Ta Olowan: The Songs of the People*.

Funding for this Viewer Discussion Guide was provided by Vision Maker Media. Vision Maker Media supports Native stories for Public Broadcasting. For more information, please visit www.visionmakermedia.org.

Educational resources for this film are available at

<http://www.visionmakermedia.org/educators/ohero:kon-under-husk>

© 2016 Vision Maker Media. All rights reserved.



Corporation
for Public
Broadcasting