

SMOKIN' FISH



“For a while, I didn’t really like it. I didn’t want to be Indian. I felt like I was being punished for something I didn’t do. I’m not always Indian, you know. I gotta have half-white days.”

— Cory Mann

Cory Mann is a quirky Tlingit businessman hustling to make a dollar in Juneau, Alaska. He gets hungry for smoked salmon, nostalgic for his childhood, and spends part of each summer smoking fish at his family’s traditional fish camp. The unusual story of his life and the untold history of his people interweave with the process of preparing traditional food as he struggles to pay his bills, and keep his business afloat. By turns tragic, bizarre or just plain ridiculous, *Smokin’ Fish*, tells the story of one man’s attempts to navigate the messy zone of collision between the modern world and an ancient culture.



Top image courtesy of Luke Griswold-Tergis and Cory Mann (Tlingit).



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This Viewer Discussion Guide is designed to encourage deeper exploration and conversations about *Smokin' Fish*, and to explore issues surrounding family, place and the places where modernity and tradition intersect.

PRODUCER'S NOTES



Producer/Director Luke Griswold-Tergis.

Image courtesy of Luke Griswold-Tergis and Cory Mann (Tlingit).

LUKE GRISWOLD-TERGIS, DIRECTOR

"This project was originally inspired by a passion for Tlingit oral history and a desire to support it. It has gone through a number of iterations and we never expected it would take this long to make. We tried to walk the fine line between acknowledging the unpleasant realities of Native life (alcoholism, families falling apart, racism...) but allowing the beauty of the culture to overwhelm that and to focus on the positive."

BY THE NUMBERS

The word "Tlingit" is pronounced Tling-git or Klin-kit and is an English version of their native word Lingit which means "the people." The Tlingit language has **24** sounds that have no counterpart in the English language.

The Tlingit word for potlatch is Qu'eeek. It literally means "you're invited."

When Alaska was made a state of the U.S. government, the lands formerly occupied by the Native Tribes was considered public domain. The Tlingit Tribe began immediately to fight for the rights to use their own homelands.

On October 18, **1966**, **17** Native organizations and over **400** people attended the first meeting of the Alaskan Federation of Natives. Their primary goal was to fight U.S. policy in order to retain their homelands.

According to the **2010** census, of the **600,000** people that live in Alaska, approximately **86,000** are Native. Of these, **16,771** are Tlingit.

Traditionally, the Tlingit canoes were carved from hollowed logs and could be anywhere from about **eleven** feet to **65** feet which were used for hunting. A canoe could take up to three months to create using hot rocks to soften the wood for carving.

The Tlingit people are scattered over many communities including Skagway, Haines, Ketchikan, Wrangell and Sitka. There are several communities in the Yukon which include Teslin, Carcross and Atlin. Additionally, there are urban populations in the cities of Whitehorse, Canada, Juneau, Anchorage, Seattle and San Francisco.

The word "potlatch" is Chinook jargon meaning, "to give."

Chilkat Blanket weaving is an art that originated with the Tsimshian people (near Wrangell) but through trade and marriage was spread to the Tlingit people. A Chilkat blanket can take up to **a year** to weave and are treasured by the people.

There are **30** clans in the Tlingit Tribe and the Tribe is organized with a matrilineal structure which means a child's clan is determined by the mother's line.

EXPLORING THE FACTS

1. In the film, Cory Mann (Tlingit) is taken away from his Tribe, his Native traditions and homelands and taken to San Diego by his mother. He was just a young boy, and in his own words, he says for a long time he thought he was Mexican. What part do you think our individual cultures and the land that we are born on plays a part in our development of personal identity?
2. Traditionally, the “smokehouse” played a central role in the Tlingit families and culture. Why do you think many Tlingit families are determined to maintain and continue the smokehouse tradition?
3. The historical loss of cultural traditions for Native people has had severe consequences. Consider for a moment the high rates of alcoholism. What is it about this kind of cultural loss do you think contributes to the alcohol abuse? Be specific and ask it not just about the Tlingit culture, but about anybody you know who may struggle with alcoholism.
4. Cory Mann was brought back to his Tlingit culture as a child, then he left again, but now as a young man he continues to work hard to keep the smokehouse tradition alive even when it takes a hit on his business. What do you think is his primary motivation for doing this—working with his nephews, building a smokehouse, returning year after year to fish and smoke the fish?
5. In the film, Cory Mann says, “Natives were always entrepreneurs.” Explain what he meant by this in your opinion.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

1. The Potlatch was an important part of many Alaskan and coastal Tribes. Do research in books or on the Internet to learn more about what was the purpose of the Potlatch. Compare and contrast four or five different Tribal examples of the Potlatch. How were they the same? How were they different? What was the primary purpose of the Potlatch?
2. The Potlatch included many ceremonies and dances as well as a give-away. In your class or social group, do research to learn more about the common elements of a traditional Potlatch. Then organize a “Multicultural Potlatch” and include as many of the elements as you can in your event and make it inclusive of the many different cultural affiliations of your area.
3. During the film, we see the participants doing many things to honor the fish—face their heads to the river and say thank you as you are bringing them in. It is clear that the fish are to be honored for the food they provide to the people. How would you describe this relationship that Native people have had with the lands and wildlife common to their homelands? How do you think that our relationship with food and the sources of our food have changed as the world has changed?
4. The Tlingit traditional images in their blankets and art tell stories about the history of the people, honor the animals that give food to the people and basically give a visual representation of the Tlingit people. Using large paper or poster board, create a “blanket” with images that honor important parts of your own culture, traditions or history. If you are descended from many different cultures, try to include them all in your representation.

IDEAS FOR ACTION (CONTINUED)

- In books, articles or on the Internet, identify the important moments on the Tlingit timeline that impacted the Tribe either negatively or positively. Then, pretend that you were a great leader at those different historical moments and identify what you would have done differently. Write it like a historical story. If you are a teacher, create teams and have teams study a historical moment and create the changed history together.
- The Tlingit culture is structured around the woman's lineage, a "matrilineal" social structure. In books, articles or on the Internet, discover more about social structures that are patrilineal or matrilineal. What does this mean for the society and for the children born into that society?

RESOURCES

HISTORY AND CULTURE OF THE TLINGITS

Native Languages of America:

http://www.bigorin.org/tlingit_kids.htm

Alaskan Native Knowledge Network (Univ. of Alaska, Fairbanks) has many resources and teacher guides about Alaskan Tribes:

<http://ankn.uaf.edu/index.html>

Countries and Their Cultures:

<http://www.everyculture.com/multi/Sr-Z/Tlingit.html>

Sheldon Museum:

<http://www.sheldonmuseum.org/tlingitpotlatch.htm>

The Penn Museum:

http://penn.museum/collections/shotridge/the_tlingit.html
<http://www.nativefederation.org/about/history.php>

ORGANIZATIONS

Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Tribes of Alaska:

<http://www.ccthita.org/about/history/index.html>

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Cory Mann (Tlingit). Image courtesy of Luke Griswold-Tergis and Cory Mann.

To find out more, please visit:

http://www.nativetelecom.org/smokin_fish

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