From the beginning, the people of the Northwest coast lived off the sea; our cultures rich in tradition, flourished. Central to our lives was the Potlatch; a ceremony of dance and gift giving that provided the key to each family’s identity, status, and our link with the past.

In the 19th century, contact with outsiders—settlers, missionaries, the government—severely limited our lives: where we lived, what we did...finally, in many cases, what we believed in.

Attempts to impose change on us came to be focused upon the Potlatch, thought by outsiders to be a symbol of waste and heathenism. In 1884, the Canadian government enacted legislation prohibiting the Potlatch.

In some of our own villages, those of the Kwakwaka’wakw, the ceremony continued in secret. In 1921, Chief Dan Cranmer held a large Potlatch on Village Island. Participants were later arrested. Some were sent to jail. Those convicted were given the option of surrendering their masks, ceremonial regalia, and coppers to avoid imprisonment. Of the confiscated treasures, some were sold and given away, the rest were consigned to the National Museum of Man) in Ottawa. There for many years they stayed. But we never forgot.

MASKS (NARRATOR VO): 60 years after Dan Cranmer’s Potlatch, Village Island lies abandoned. Its houses are empty. The people gone. In the faces of the totem poles, one senses a change, a way of life succumbing to the effects of intervention.

ALERT BAY
Of those who left their villages, many came to live in Alert Bay. The island is shared: a white municipality at one end, Indian Reserves at the other. While in many ways Alert Bay is similar to other fishing communities, it has also become a
center from which we have begun the task of examining all that was almost lost.

GLORIA SYNCH
A lot of people have heard about the Kwakiutl. We’re probably the most highly anthropologized group of native people in the world. But a lot of those people who have read about us think that we all died, that we’ve disappeared, because we were the vanishing races those early white people said we were. And when you look at museum exhibits in a lot of places, it’s as if we were gone. There’s no reference to us still being here, still being alive. And we are.

POTLATCH (NARRATOR VO):
For years, there were few potlatches; many people forgot the dances and their meaning. But some remembered.

GLORIA SYNCH
Enough of the old people believe that it was right to continue potlatching and so they did in spite of the law, and how lucky for us that there were some of them.

AGNES ALFRED SYNCH
The potlatch was given to us as our way of expressing joy. All people are given their ways of doing things. And the dancing is our way of being happy.

CARVERS (NARRATOR VO):
Once more, artists create traditional, masks and poles, following designs that are centuries old.

CARVER VO
And once you’ve done the design thing this is the most important thing anyway. Then you should be on your way with anything. A forty-foot pole or a twelve-inch mask you have to think “design” all the time that you’re doing it. Doing it exactly as the old people did it.

DOWNTOWN ALERT BAY (NARRATOR VO)
Still, in many ways, Alert Bay is a modern town. Although the government has placed strict limitations on our fishing rights, most of us continue to make our living from the sea.

FISHING
CHRIS COOK
You could call us more like the salmon people in this area. This is all we’ve ever lived on from time, and we still depend on the fishing and the sea.

CHRIS COOK
Our people have always fished where, when, and how they wanted. We can no longer do that. There’s a moratorium on black cod, halibut, next thing you know it will be clams and everything like this.

The ocean is our whole lifeline, I think to cut off the lifeline like the salmon, is like taking the dirt away from the farmers, we no longer would exist.

We’re now looking at hours in fishing, where we used to look at days. I think we’ve got to tell them, this is it, we’re not going to be pushed anymore, we can’t be pushed anymore because we’re right to the bottom now.

MEETING (NARRATIVE VO)
Many political battles are being fought these days in Alert Bay, of all of the things that have been taken away from us; none symbolizes our loss more than the masks taken after Dan Cranmer’s potlatch.
For some years, we negotiated with the National Museum of Man to have the masks returned to us. Finally, in the early seventies the museum agreed to return its portion of the collection on the condition that we build a museum in which to house them.

CONSTRUCTION OF CENTER
(NARRATOR VO)
And so, in 1979, construction began on the cultural center. Working with cedar logs, our carvers prepared the posts and beams that would later support the building.

The structure itself has been designed to blend past and present. The unique aspect of the design—a traditional-Big House space in which we now call the Potlatch Collection. By the summer of 1980, the Center was almost completed. This was a very special time for all of us, especially the old people who never forgot what happened to us in 1921.

GLORIA SYNCH
AGNES ALFRED SYNCH.
This place built on the beach, that you call the museum. We have not had such a thing among our people. It is like a storage box, like a box of treasures the old people used to have.

MASKS IN CENTER MASKS CLOSE UP
(GLORIA VO)
The objects in the Potlatch Collection have been arranged in this Big House space more or less in the order that they would appear in a potlatch. And they’re not in cases. The feeling some of us had when the pieces were returned was that they’d been locked up for so long in a strange place that it seemed wrong to lock them up again.

CENTER INTERIORS
(NARRATOR)
With the Potlatch Collection finally in place, and only a few days remaining before the Center would open, the rest of the exhibits were installed: objects from our own basements and attics placed in the Center for storage; gifts
DOCUMENTARY EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

given to the Center by artists and museums, and a series of photographs of our old village sites, each with its creation story below. The Center was to be far more than a museum. It was in fact our box of treasures and a focus for all our efforts to strengthen the culture, language, and history that were almost lost. We named it the U’Mista Cultural Center.

GLORIA SYNCH
U’Mista means the return of something important. In earlier days, people were sometimes taken as slaves by other groups. When those people were returned to their homes, either through payment of ransom or through a retaliatory raid, they were said to have U’Mista. When we were looking for a name for this place, we talked to the old people, and a couple of them said, “It will be as if those masks, and other treasures are U’Mista. They’re coming home to us.”

OPENING DAY SPEECHES
SPEECHES:
BILL CRANMER
We dedicate the U’Mista Cultural Center to our forefathers whose struggle and suffering during the years of Potlatch prohibition have left us a legacy in which we can take pride.

We recognize their greatness and value, the rich history they bequeath us. The U’Mista Cultural Center is not a memorial to a dead past, it is a symbol of our survival, and in it we strengthen a culture we might have lost had not our forefathers been strong for us.

JIM KING (Kwakwala)
Listen now chiefs, we have gathered here for a great occasion. We have come to see our name placed in this museum. The strength of our past chief has returned gloriously. Oh that they could see what has been done. Now you will speak chiefs, in the way you always speak. You, “Great Mountain” go ahead, chief, speak.

TOMMY HUNT (Kwakwala)
Thank you, Copper Maker. We have come, invited by the chiefs of the Nimpkish.

HELEN KNOX (Kwakwala)
We have come here, even at the age we are. I am very grateful for this great thing that has happened and that we have been invited.

CAPE MUDGE SPEAKER
You heard some of my other chiefs talk about losing their language, you heard some of our people talk about losing our dances and our songs, our legends. It’s not an easy thing for a man to do that. It’s like stripping away his soul, and there’s nothing worse than that.

AGNES CRANMER (Kwakwala)
Almost 60 years ago these things were taken. My husband Mr. Cranmer was stripped, he had nothing. He came back only a man with no possessions. That is why I have done this, being strong so my children could be lifted up again, so they could own things. Now I ask only that we enjoy ourselves tonight. What white people call a good time, we’ll have a good time.
PEOPLE INSIDE CENTER (GLORIA VO)
Opening day, although there was just this enormous joy and happiness, I think for some of us there was also some sadness.

GLORIA SYNCH
I thought as the chiefs spoke today, that I wish there had been some way that those people my father included, could have been here, to see what we have accomplished.

VISITORS LOOKING AT MASKS (GLORIA VO)
And then I realized that there was no reason to be sad, that somehow they were here with us. If we had forgotten all of them, I don’t think we would have worked as hard as we did for the return of this collection.

POTLATCH
SUNRISE (GLORIA VO)
We came very close to losing our culture, our language, for a lot of people even interest in knowing about those things.

GLORIA SYNCH
We’re lucky; we’re very fortunate that we have something to build on. That we have old people who care, that we have younger people who are beginning to realize the importance of knowing these things. And we’re lucky that we have this Center in which to try and build some of this store of knowledge that all of us need to know who we are.

VIEDOTAPING OF AGNES CRANMER (NARRATOR VO)
The old people are the links to our history. So that the past does not die with them, their memories and stories are being recorded at the Center.
VIDEOTAPING SYNCH
AGNES: The Kwakiutl never stopped potlatch- ing. The time we really enjoyed Potlatching was in the winter, when the police couldn't travel by boat, this was before there were roads.

RUTH: You waited until it was stormy?

AGNES: Yes, that was the best time, when we were afraid of nothing.

GLORIA SYNCH
When the old people are gone, then there will be people like me, all we can do right now is try to learn as much from our present generation of old people so that we have that kind of thing to teach the younger generation.

GLORIA'S LEGEND CLASS. GLORIA SYNCH
Anakalog the Transformer moved through the world changing things, changing animals into people and rocks into different forms. He came to the Nimpkish River where a man lived named Gwatnalalies. Can you say Gwatnalalies? OK. So Anakalog showed up and he said to Gwatnalalies, “Do you want to be a

MOUNTAIN

mountain?” “No,” Gwatnalalies answered. “For mountains have slides and crumble away for as long as the days dawn in the world.” Anakalog asked again, “Would you like to become a cedar tree?”

TREES

Gwatnalalies replied, “No, cedar trees when struck by lightening split and fall, then they rot away for as long as days dawn in the world.” Finally, Anakalog asked, “Would you like to become a

RIVER

river?” “Yes, let me become a river that I may flow for as long as the days shall dawn in the world,” Gwatnalalies replied.

GLORIA SYNCH
So Anakalog put his hand on Gwatnalalies’ forehead and pushed him flat on the ground, and he became the river Gwatney. OK.

VERA SYNCH
There’s a whole different generation coming up, and that’s the very reason why we started teaching it right as young as the nursery school age, is because you can’t grab people when after they’re already teenagers like they did to us and say you’re an Indian. All of a sudden we were Indians, we were all trying to be white when we were growing up.
GLORIA SYNCH
There are some people who feel that the kind of things we’re teaching children now has no place in today’s world, that potlatches, that language belong somewhere in the past, and that we have to get on with the business of living today. And that the language that you work in is English, so you don’t need anything else. Some of us don’t believe that.

LANGUAGE CLASS
(NARRATOR VO)
Teaching Kwakwala to the children of Alert Bay is an ironic reversal of the situation their grandparents faced at the same school fifty years ago.

ATTA SYNCH
It was really kind of tough for us because we didn’t know how to speak English when I first went to school. And I left the classroom I was talking Kwakwala to our friends, and a teacher caught me and she said, “You must not talk Kwakwala..” And she sent me back in a classroom to make me write it 500 times in a book.

JAY AND ATTA RECORDING KWAKWALA
JAY AND ATTA WORKING (NARRATOR VO)
Now, with so few people left to speak our language--and an incomplete written record of it--we are making efforts to save Kwakwala with the help of a linguist.

JAY AND ATTA WORKING (JAY VO)
 Probably we’ve got two or three generations more in which Kwakwala will be spoken actively in the community, unless we can turn the tide now. We have a chance to do that. Atta and I get together and work on words and phrases that we-think the kids could easily be taught. These are then put into books, illustrated with local scenes so that the kids can identify, so that they are the community’s books.

LANGUAGE CLASS
(JAY VO)
The Kwakwala speakers have given me an interesting opportunity, the opportunity to pay back an Indian community for all of the generations of anthropologists who took away their understandings rather than giving them back to the community.

TIDI SYNCH
The language programs and cultural programs that we teach in the schools I don’t think we just teach them a language, but we try to include a lot of the child’s history, or where certain students are from.

MAP CLASS
TIDI TEACHING IN FRONT OF MAP
TIDI VO IN FRONT OF MAP CLASS
I feel a lot of our people try to go and be something they’re not, to be accepted into the
white society, but I, feel with our U’Mista Cultural Center here that hopefully this will help them find their real identity and they will be proud of it.

ETHEL AND JACK DRUMMING
KIDS DANCING
(GLORIA VO)
It gives real pleasure to see the kids are interested in learning our culture, because I grew up with it when I was a little girl. I just love to see the children dance.

When we look at the way the children are learning the movements of the dance, we can congratulate ourselves for doing a pretty good job. On the other hand, we have to realize that we’re competing with a lot of modern things that are very much a part of our kids’ lives today. Like television and cars and video games. We really don’t know how these kids feel about the kinds of things we’re teaching them. We don’t know how well it’s going to work. We can only try.

GLORIA SYNCH
I think you have to believe that it’s important for them, even if they don’t realize it right now, that it’s really important for them to know who they are. They may leave the island eventually and go and live somewhere else. Their chances of making it are going to be a lot better if they’re strong, if they feel that they’re worthwhile people, otherwise they’re simply not going to make it.

BILL VO. KIDS. IN CENTER. MEETING
You could sum it all up by saying that it’s important that you know your past if you’re going to be fighting for your future.

BILL SYNCH
The issues that we’re dealing with can be all lumped into one thing: aboriginal rights. What we think is aboriginal rights includes the fishing, that’s an aboriginal right, the right to maintain our culture and language—that’s an aboriginal right, the right to govern ourselves, teach our children. The right to maintain everything that goes on in our community, the right to control the habitat, the environment, that surrounds us, those are all aboriginal rights, all of these things we are dealing with on a day-to-day basis. It’s a constant struggle, and I suppose it’s going to be a struggle for a time to come yet.

KIDS DANCING IN CENTER (GLORIA VO)
We’ve won some victories the people in this area. The masks have come home. The old people are teaching the children what they know. We’re rebuilding and we’re growing stronger in all sorts of ways.
We use this Center as a focus of that rebuilding. And all the time that we’re doing these things with our kids, we realize that there are all sorts of other things happening outside of this Center over which we have no control. The fact that the logging industry has practically wiped out whole salmon spawning streams, the fact that those logging companies make a lot of money on what were our traditional lands and that we don’t share in those profits. The fact that health care facilities for Indians are pretty inadequate. The fact that the education system for Indians is pretty inadequate. Those are the things that we have to continue working at the same time we celebrate the good things that have happened for us. But most of all we celebrate the fact that we’re still alive, we’re still here. We’ve survived. And we’ll continue to survive. And we’re always going to be here.
Film Credits

A film By
Chuck Olin and the U’mista Cultural Centre

Festivals, Screenings, Awards

Museum of the American Indian, NATIVE AMERICA NOW 1986
American Film Festival Blue Ribbon 1985
CINE Golden Eagle Award 1985
Festival dei Popoli, Florence, Italy
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