RED CEDAR BARK CEREMONIES

Each tribe of the Kwakwaka'wakw knows the story of how their tribe and village came to be. These stories are sometimes called myth, but they are actually our oral history and they tell how people met supernatural beings at the beginning of the world.

Kwakwaka'wakw oral history tells how the ancestors of families came to have the dances and songs that were shown at potlatches. Each family has particular dances that they have the right to do. Sometimes families have these rights because their ancestry were given them by supernatural beings. In some other cases, the families seized them as booty in raids, or got them through marriage. The Kwakwaka'wakw prize their dances because the hereditary rights to dances are a way of sharing their families' history and traditions.

Dancing is not only a Kwakwaka'wakw right and privilege, it is an obligation. As the chiefs said to Franz Boas (anthropologist who spent a lot of time studying Kwakwaka'wakw culture) when he first came to their ceremonies in Fort Rupert, "It is a strict law that bids us dance." Sharing our dances is not just a chance to show them, it is one of the ways that we carry out our responsibilities as Kwakwaka'wakw.

THE T̓SEKA

Today, the dancing at potlatches is divided into two parts. The first are dances of the Winter Ceremonial or T̓seka. You can tell which dances are a part of the T̓seka because red cedar bark is used in the regalia. For that reason, the dances of the T̓seka are also known as "Red Cedar bark dances." Another way to recognize these dances is because the dancers nearly always do a counter–clockwise turn as they enter and leave the dance floor of the Bighouse. The second part are dances of the Tła'sala – peace dances.

The dances of the T̓seka were shown at potlatches held during the winter months of November to March. In winter, several supernatural (spirits) beings return to live near the villages and catch men and women who then become possessed (under the control of the spirit or under the beings' power, they would become like this being.) The family members who became possessed by the supernatural power could be recaptured by their families and calmed or tamed to the point that they can live among people again.

This time every winter when people were possessed and recaptured was very important. During this time people would change their names and at the end of the ceremonial season they would quit using special winter ceremonial names. This is the time chiefs and their families would invite guests from other villages to witness their ceremonial dances at a potlatch.

THE MOST IMPORTANT SUPERNATURAL BEINGS FOR THE KWAKWAKA'WAKW ARE:

1. **Baxwbakwalanuksiwe'** – the cannibal who lives at the north end of the world. This man eater lives with many servants in a house in the mountains that always has red smoke rising from the smoke hole. Those possessed by him become Hamat̓sa, and they have the crave for human flesh, just as Baxwbakwalanuksiwe' does.

2. **Winalagalis** – this spirit also lives in the north and travels constantly in an invisible copper canoe, the only sign of his passing is the sound of his copper paddle hitting the side of his canoe. His name means “Making War around the World” and those possessed by him become extremely warlike.

3. **Madam** – this is a supernatural being who lives on the top of a high mountain near Woss Lake (on Vancouver Island) and gives the power to fly to all those he possesses.

MAKING THE CEDAR BARK RED

Each of the dances belonging to the T̓seka ceremony has specific regalia that the dancer uses when sharing his/her dance. Some of the regalia is made with cedar bark that is dyed red or left natural. After the cedar bark has been prepared for making one or more of the following pieces; neckrings, headpieces, skirts, capes or leggings then it would be dyed, with the inner bark of the alder tree. Today when new T̓seka regalia is made, most people use red clothing dye to make the cedar bark red.

Most cedar regalia is made with cedar bark that is natural and dyed red. The one dancer whose regalia is dyed all red is the most important dance amongst the Kwakwaka’wakw, the Hamat̓sa.