HAMAT̓SA FACT SHEET

Of all the dances of the Kwakwaka̲'wakw, the Hamat̓sa is considered to be the most important. The right to perform this dance is owned by particular families whose members have been possessed generation after generation by Baxwbakwalanuksiwe' the man-eating supernatural being. The dance acts out the capture, return, and calming of the initiate.

Although many families do the Hamat̓sa, it is not uncommon to see differences in the way it is performed. These differences depend on the families' rights and traditions. Some families have the rights to use songs, masks, and other regalia that are not used by all families. Some families customarily dance in a different manner from others. Remember that there is no single "correct" way to do our dances. Families that do dances differently from the way your family does them are not necessarily wrong. They are just doing the dances according to their family tradition.

HAMAT̓SA INITIATION

The Hamat̓sa initiation ceremony has changed a great deal since the old days. In days long ago, a new initiate used to become possessed by the cannibal spirit and go into the woods for up to four months returning to the edge of his village yelling, "hap, hap" (this word has to do with the word "eat"). When he returned to his village he would be captured by the healers in the Hamat̓sa society, and they would begin to tame or calm the Hamat̓sa initiate.

After the mourning songs you will hear m̲adzis (whistles) blown again and again. The whistle sounds come from behind the dance screen, which is behind the singers, or it may sound like it is coming from outside the Bighouse, or even on the dance floor. Once the whistles start, this indicates that the Hamat̓sa ceremony has started. The whistle sounds are said to represent the sound of Baxwbakwalanuksiwe' moving through the woods. He has so many mouths on his body that when he walks it sounds like the whistles that we hear.

Today the Hamat̓sa initiate comes through the front door wearing; neck rings, skirt, wristlets, anklets and headpiece made of hemlock boughs. His Hilig̲a̲x̲ste' usually comes through the front door in front of the initiate also wearing hemlock boughs. She helps in the taming or calming of the Hamat̓sa. While he is going around the dance floor, he is surrounded by attendants who have rattles, and the sound of the rattle helps to soothe the new Hamat̓sa. The hemlock regalia are taken off the initiate and the attendants dress him in his cedar bark regalia. In the olden days only a Hamat̓sa had cedar regalia that was dyed totally red. His cedar bark regalia include two neckrings, skirt, wristlets, anklets and headpiece. He then begins to dance around the fire, which is burning in the middle of the dance floor. Three songs will be sung for him before he becomes wild and xwas̲a̲lił (yells "hap, hap") as he is held by his attendants and they circle the dance floor one time, then he goes behind the dance screen and you hear the clapping of the wooden beaks of the H̲a̲ms̲a̲mł – cannibal bird attendants of Baxwbakwalanuksiwe'.

HAMSAMALA

The Hamsamala (or dance of the Hamaťsa masks) is the third part of the Hamaťsa ceremony. The number and type of masks used by each family depends upon the rights of the family. You may see the huxwhukw (long beaked bird), a Galukwamł (the crooked beak mask), and a raven (bird with a shorter curved beak). The bodies of the dancers who wear these masks are covered with shredded cedar bark, which is dyed red and also natural colour. These dancers will dance in each corner of the Bighouse, listening to the beat from the long drum, which the singers use. At a certain point in the song, the dancer claps the beak of the mask and says, “Hap! Hap! Hap! Hap!” It is a very serious mistake to let the masks collide with one another while they are on the floor, so the dancers and their attendants pay close attention.

The final (and last) part of the Hamaťsa starts with the initiate coming out to xwasalił one more time. He runs around the fire, turns, and then goes back behind the dance screen again. Then he comes out to dance one last time. This time he is quite calm and wears a button blanket or a bearskin blanket that is decorated with shredded cedar bark and skulls. He will have his Hiligaxste’ leading him. After the two have gone around the dance floor by themselves once, other Hamaťsa in the family and from other tribes come out to dance dressed in their tamed Hamaťsa regalia, which could include, carved headdresses, blankets aprons and neck rings. These other Hamaťsa are paying their respect to the new Hamaťsa.