

The dancer meanwhile danced with glowing coals held in his hands. He played with them recklessly. Some he put in his mouth, others he threw about among the assembled people, burning them and setting fire to their cedar-bark garments. When the Bear Dancers danced, the chorus sang:

Great is the fury of this great supernatural one.
He will carry men in his arms and torment them.
He will devour them skin and bones, crushing flesh
and bone with his teeth.

All dancers who made mistakes in their performances must always fall down as if dead, and the Bear impersonators fell upon them and tore them to pieces. Sometimes this was a pretence, but according to the traditional teaching for certain errors there was no mitigation of the penalty. The Bears were dressed for their great ceremonies completely in black bearskins, and even on lesser occasions they wore upon their arms the skins of the bear's forelegs with all the claws displayed. The Bears danced around the fire, clawing the earth and imitating the motions of angry bears, while the people sang the song of a Bear dancer:

How shall we hide from the bear that is moving
all around the world?
Let us crawl underground! Let us cover our backs
with dirt that the terrible great bear from
the north of the world may not find us.

These dances of the Northwest Coast were the performances of religious societies into which individuals were initiated by the supernatural patrons of the society. The experience of meeting the supernatural spirit was closely related to that of the vision, the experience which in so many parts of North America gave to the suppliant, fasting in isolation and often torturing himself, the