

photo essay

Carnival in Ghana

Fancy Dress Street Parades and Competition

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Fancy Dress, a lively secular masquerade performed throughout coastal Ghana, mainly comprises young men and women who identify themselves as Fante, an Akan subgroup dominating the Central Region. Members from Effutu, Ahanta, Ga, and other coastal communities are also involved. Fancy Dress is a carnivalesque form adopted by locals soon after World War I from sailors, travelers, and colonial soldiers who dressed in special costumes and enacted plays aboard ships and in port cities of the Caribbean, Brazil, West Africa, and India. According to Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, the carnivalesque practiced in popular culture overturns sociopolitical and religious truths. Therefore, men become women, fools become wise, beggars become kings, and the figures of heaven and hell, specifically angels and devils, intermingle (Bakhtin 1984:11, 15).

Previous research on Fancy Dress is minimal. My future research may uncover an earlier date, yet at this time I can only prove a possible local adoption of the form by 1919. John Nunley (2010:51–54) has proposed a date from the 1850s to 1870s, when West Indian regiments from Jamaica and/or Trinidad via Freetown, Sierra Leone, were brought to Ghana by the British to aid in their wars against the Asante Kingdom. Nunley bases his theory on John Kedjany's (1968:85) documentation of one Fante man claiming that Fancy Dress was introduced by Sierra Leoneans in the nineteenth century. I continue to search for photographs and journal entries to corroborate statements I have gathered from several elderly Fante that Fancy Dress was brought to Ghana by Brazilians or Europeans (British, Dutch, or Germans) in the early twentieth century. Most likely it came by way of multiple groups on board ships traveling to and from British Empire ports, yet the date is still in question.

Ghanaian Fancy Dress has become an integral part of local celebrations such as Easter, Christmas, New Year's Day, harvest festivals, and at member funerals. Street parading incorporates periods of intense dancing in front of chiefs' palaces, hotels, and public squares. The Winneba city competition, known as Masquefest, is held on New Year's Day. More than 400 participants in four different groups compete for three judges secretly chosen each year by the Centre for National Culture–Central Region for a trophy and a share of the admission proceeds. Brass band members join these groups in the parades and competition, playing mostly trumpets, trombones, bass, and snare drums. This photo essay is based on my fieldwork since 2009 and provides a glimpse of recent street parade performances and the Masquefest competition.

Street parading has ties to local ritual performances by the *asafo*, an old Akan institution consisting of paramilitary troops with religious and civic responsibilities. During performance rituals designed to appease local ancestors and deities, *asafo* members parade through the older streets in town. Fancy Dress members similarly parade down the same streets, yet they wear masks and costumes, dancing freestyle to traditional *adaha*, or *atwim*, music provided by the brass bands to collect dashes, or tips. Characters such as the Red Indian were borrowed from Fancy Dress for *asafo* performances from the 1950s to late 1970s to encourage youth participation and enliven the space. To change the time and space of a performance area, movement, sound, and visual forms are utilized to create a multisensory

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1 Cape Coast's Holy Cities group performs in an Easter street parade April 7, 2012. Notice the masquerader wearing a rubber mask of Barack Obama.

environment unlike anything experienced in daily living. This relates to Bakhtin's theory that "carnival is the people's second life" (1984:8). However, important differences exist between Fancy Dress and *asafo* characters (Micots 2012:29–30).

According to many elders living in the coastal towns today, Fante inhabitants first performed Fancy Dress in Saltpond, an important port town at the turn of the century. It quickly spread to Cape Coast, Winneba, and nearly every major town along the coast. Today, Fancy Dress comprises young men and sometimes women between 3 and 45 years of age; the majority is in their teens and twenties, with leaders in their thirties and forties. Fancy Dress extends into towns across the coast beyond the Central Region into Accra and Tema with eleven groups in the Greater Accra Region to the east and Sekondi-Takoradi with twenty groups in the Western Region. More than 100 members may participate in each group. Groups tend to form, split, and disintegrate regularly and members may or may not participate in an event. Most groups have at least one group father, usually

the creator of the group or a descendant, who oversees the group as a whole. Elected positions such as chairman or president are responsible for the general organization.

Since participants dress as characters that excite and scare their audience, characters and costumes fluctuate over time. Tailors, often group members, sew the costumes, which are paired with either a local mask made of cloth, wire mesh, or papier-mâché, or a rubber animal or horror mask, purchased in Accra or Takoradi or imported from North America and given to the members by friends and patrons. A headdress constructed of fiber, cloth, Christmas garland, and/or mirrors may be added. While most costumes outside Winneba have become more generalized over the years as an assemblage of colorful patchwork

known as “Simple Dress,” Winneba groups create new and exciting costumes for Masquefest each year.

After Ghana achieved its independence in 1957, President Kwame Nkrumah’s administration promoted a Fancy Dress Masquefest competition on New Year’s Day in Winneba, held annually since 1958. The Winneba Masquerade Federation was created to oversee the groups and competition. Masqueraders parade through town in their old costumes for Christmas to collect funds for the New Year’s Day Masquefest competition and then parade the streets again the day after the competition in their new costumes. Brass bands play popular tunes like “Jingle Bells” or “Waist & Power (African Man)” (by 4x4) in a blues or highlife style. The entire town gathers for the event. Thus, the groups are highly motivated to change their costumes, music and dances each year in an effort to impress the judges and audience.

Some of the characters intentionally mock or present a satirical challenge to authority and the traditional social hierarchy. For example, the winners of Masquefest 2011, Red Cross No. 4, performed a skit during the *atwim* dance that was a parody of the traditional Winneba annual festival Aboakyir. The main event is a deer hunt in which young men from the town’s two *asafo* companies chase and capture a live antelope with their bare hands. The antelope is sacrificed to the local deities; libations and prayers for the protection of the community for another year are completed. Red Cross used a four-foot-tall teddy bear in place of the antelope for their parody. Not only was this substitution amusing, but also the public understood it as a statement meant for the town leaders who, because of a leadership or stool dispute, had not sanctioned Aboakyir since 2009. The skit’s effectiveness is evidenced by the resolution of the stool dispute by October of 2011, and Aboakyir took place in May of 2012.

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2 Saltpond’s Chinese and Holy Cities groups perform in a New Year’s Eve street parade, December 31, 2011.



3 Most group leaders require their young members to attend school and achieve good grades. These young participants in Elmina show off their wire masks, containers for dashes, and Simple Dress costumes during the Bakatue festival July 9, 2011.



4 Masqueraders of the Elmina branch of Holy Cities wearing Simple Dress costume pose for the camera before performing in the Bakatue festival July 9, 2011. The group father, Fire, a.k.a. Kwesi Kaya Anas, squats on the far left. He wears a silk-screened t-shirt advertising his Holy Cities Academy Masquerade Society, based in Cape Coast with branches in Elmina and Saltpond.



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5 The Holy Cities group in Cape Coast has recently taken masking further by utilizing a sort of body mask constructed by local artist Mr. Aggrey, who used papier maché to create images of an angel and Jesus Christ. The use of oversized papier maché masks is utilized in Guinea Bissau (Ross 1993) and other areas along the West African rim. Masqueraders from the Holy Cities group in an Easter street parade, April 7, 2012.

6 The first masks to be worn by participants were imported masks brought to the coastal ports from Austria, Germany, and India. Locals ascribed their own meanings and interpretations to the masks; imported masks have always been favored. In fact, carnival in Ghana and the Caribbean shared the use of these imported masks and other products, as they were initially connected to the substantial trade and commerce networks of British colonies in the Caribbean islands, Ghana, Nigeria, and India. Masks could also be ordered through German and Austrian mid-century catalogs. However, artists in Ghana were inspired by the catalog images to create their own versions. Four types of facial masks are crafted and worn in Ghana today: those using wire mesh, papier maché, cloth, and, more rarely, leather masks. Performers generally favor imported rubber animal or horror masks. These inexpensive wire mesh masks were made in Swedru and sold in Winneba prior to Masquefest 2012.



7 Devil performed by a masquerader in a heavy fiber costume dyed purple and papier-mâché mask (with removable tongue for drinking) during the Nobles No. 1 parade after Christmas 2011 in Winneba.



8 Great variety in mask and costume style occurs between characters of a similar theme. This devil sports a costume made from red and white striped cloth with a band-aid-shaped motif in blue with small white stars, making a tantalizing reference to the American flag. Participants and observers, however, told me they just liked the color combination. Nobles No. 1 parade after Christmas 2011 in Winneba.



9 Stilt walkers, or *sakramodu*, performing on wooden stilts ranging from 12 to 15 feet in height, are an exciting component of any street parade and competition. Stilt walkers from the winning Tumas No. 3 group perform during the slow dance portion of Masquefest 2012. Fancy Dress leaders may give their groups numbers according to seniority. The numbers following the group names in Winneba—Nobles No. 1, Egyaa No. 2, Tumas No. 3, and Red Cross No. 4—reflect the order in which those groups developed.

10 Devils and angels are equally popular. A member of Red Cross No. 4 wears a repurposed rubber helmet mask of Ronald Reagan for his angel. He performs a special skit with an oversized Bible during Inspection in Masquefest 2012. Masquefest incorporates five essential events performed in this order: inspection, march pass, slow dance or blues, highlife, and *atwim*, or speed dance. These routines are more formalized in the competition setting than in the loosely choreographed street parades. Judges award high marks for excellence in synchronized dancing, creative choreography, relatable skits, and inventive costume design.





11 During Masquefest competitions, troupes of four members in similar costume or type march side by side as they enter the stadium grounds. A troupe of Roman Soldiers from Nobles No. 1 in 2012, proudly display their costumes fashioned with large festive bows and a helmet creatively topped with part of an imported broom.



12 Costumes worn in Winneba have retained many of the elements of the older styles. Most characters wear colorful Christmas garland, glass balls, jingle bells, and other festive materials amassed in profusion on hats formed of cardboard and covered with shiny paper. Mirrors, important for their shine factor, may be attached. "Shiny" is a quality deemed most important. Appliqué cloth and lace cover the costumes in decorative abundance. Capes extend to the back of the knee and often have attached jingle bells to add sound to the performer's movements. Accumulation and assemblage are essential elements in all costumes. Red Cross No. 4 member awaits inspection during Masquefest 2012.



13 (front/back) John Barnsly, the new Chairman of Red Cross No. 4 in 2011, exhibits his fine costume as a scorpion in Masquefest 2012. The scorpion character is more easily distinguished when one can view the costume and headdress in the round.

14 Imported logos are common elements placed on the backs of Winneba costumes. Most refer to ideas of wealth, power, and strength, perhaps attracting these qualities to enhance his or her performance and life. Fancy Dress as an art form is often criticized as “not serious” by the upper classes of Ghanaian society for its importation of global culture and materials.





15 An older member of an Egyaa No. 2 troupe of blue-costumed animals leads a younger member onto the field during Masquefest 2012. Judges criticized groups for involving their youngest members (some are only 3 years old) during the entire five-hour competition in the direct sun and heat.

16 Nobles No. 1 troupe of Cowboys awaits costume inspection in Masquefest 2012. Hollywood Cowboy and Indian films were shown to children in the Christian missions and later in cinema houses. Artists and groups were inspired to create both of these warrior characters. Although the Red Indian was most popular from the 1930s to 1970s, the Cowboy has gained in popularity. While it may appear to be a form of mimicry at first glance, warrior characters emanating from the lower classes often negotiate power through dance and by demonstrating local aesthetic preferences and the current sociopolitical situation (Micots 2012:29, 30–31).



17 Red Cross No. 4 performed an educational skit regarding fishing practices during their atwim dance in the 2012 Masquefest competition. On either side of a wooden boat constructed for the event marched men, dressed as market women, carrying large baskets on their head and holding signs that read "No More Dynamite" and "Stop Using Chemicals." These messages relate to practices deemed illegal by the government.



18 In the year of a presidential election, Nobles No. 1 showed its support of the NDC party with a troupe of four masqueraders wearing costumes and headdress made from wax print cloth brandishing the NDC logo and carrying NDC umbrellas during Masquefest 2012.