Fancy Dress: African Masquerade in Coastal Ghana

- Characters
- Costumes and Masks
- Performance

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the term *fancy dress* was used to indicate dressing up in special costumes, performed aboard ships and in port cities of the Caribbean, Brazil, West Africa, and India by American and European travelers and colonial soldiers. This Victorian pastime consisted of adult men dressing up in costumes, wigs, and makeup to portray characters or types, such as members of the British royalty, mythological gods, historical figures, loose women, various wild animals, and the cowboys and Indians of the romanticized North American West. The men would perform comedic skits, including a "crossing-the-line" naval initiation ceremony, on deck to entertain the crew and passengers. In addition, separate fancy dress parties were held for adults (including both men and women) and children in these foreign destinations. Young boys and girls might also dress as ballerinas, clowns, or their nannies. The locals, many of whom had similar performance traditions, enjoyed the festive nature of these costumes and performed skits.

Several local groups along the West African coastline adopted fancy dress, yet the form and characters were reinterpreted according to the personal and cultural preferences of the artists and individuals. In Ghana two types of performances were inspired in part by fancy dress in the early twentieth century—the *concert party* (a traveling theater group) and an African form of fancy dress. Both were popular among the urban working-class and rural populations. The concert party used blackface and vaudeville elements to perform skits on some type of stage, while fancy dress groups paraded the streets wearing masks in addition to costumes, dancing freestyle to traditional *adaha*, or *atwim*, music provided by brass bands at certain points along the route to collect *dashes* (tips). Street parading has ties to ritual performances by the *asafo*, an old Akan institution consisting of paramilitary troops with religious and civic responsibilities. The concert party group traveled across the British colony offering their entertainment at any time of year. In contrast, fancy dress performers appeared only during local harvest festivals; on holidays such as Easter, Christmas, New Year's Day, and Empire Day; and at members' funerals.

According to many elders living in the coastal towns, Fante inhabitants first performed Fancy Dress shortly after World War I in Saltpond, an important port town at the turn of the century. It quickly spread to Cape Coast, Winneba, and nearly every major town in Ghana's Central Region. In the early twenty-first century, Fancy Dress is a voluntary secular organization comprised of young men and sometimes women between the ages of three and forty-five years of age; the majority are in their teens and twenties, with leaders in their thirties and forties. While most identify themselves as Fante, an Akan subgroup that dominates the Central Region, members from Effutu, Ahanta, Ga, and other coastal communities are also involved. In the early twenty-first century, Fancy Dress extends beyond the Central Region into cities and towns along the coast, including Tema with nine groups in the Greater Accra Region to the east, and Sekondi-Takoradi, with twenty groups in the Western Region. More than a hundred members may participate in each group. Groups tend to form, split, and disintegrate regularly, and members may or may not participate in a particular event.

Fancy Dress is the English name for the local Ghanaian equivalents Kakabotini, Kakabotofo, Katabotofo, Kakabotobe, and Kokoorebabaa, essentially all meaning a group that frightens (usually children). Members often create characters that are meant to scare, such as wild animals (gorillas, lions), fierce warriors, and horror-movie villains. However, the general purpose is to entertain. Many young children participate as members, or they follow the performers and dance with them. Even so, when one of the adult masqueraders challenges them, the children run away, partly in fear, partly in fun.

Groups are named, inspired by both local and imported ideas. Early Saltpond group names included the Red Indians, Chinese, Anchors, and Tumus (the last either is an abbreviated form of "two moves" or is derived from *atumba rosa*, "a goldsmith," referring to a call-and-response musical pattern, like a hammer on an anvil). In the early twenty-first century, only the Chinese group continues to perform, joined by more recent groups—the Great Justice, Holy Cities, and a newly created Tumus. Early groups in Cape Coast consisted of the Stamfast, Everlasours, Akotex, Oguaa Akoto, Anchors, and Asese Ban, yet these have since disbanded. Holy Cities was formed in Cape Coast in 1989 and has the strongest following in the early twenty-first century, inspiring sister groups in Saltpond and Elmina. Groups are also numbered in many areas. Unlike the asafo, which were assigned numbers by the colonial administration for their records, Fancy Dress leaders gave their groups numbers according to seniority. Thus, the numbers following the group names in Winneba—Nobles No. 1, Egyaa No. 2, Tumus No. 3, and Red Cross No. 4—reflect the order in which those groups developed.

After Ghana achieved its independence in 1957, President Kwame Nkrumah's administration promoted several sporting activities and a Fancy Dress Masquefest competition, which has been held annually on New Year's Day at Winneba since 1958. The Winneba Masquerade Federation was created to oversee the groups and the annual competition. The idea may have been borrowed from Jamaican Jonkonnu competitions, established in the early 1950s. Since the early 1990s, NFAC competitions in a variety of dance forms, including Fancy Dress, have occurred every two years, rotating within the ten regions of Ghana. The 2012 NFAC competition is supposed to take place in Sunyani, the capital of the Brong-Ahafo Region. The winners receive money and a framed certificate. Groups from most regions compete in the Fancy Dress category and may utilize entirely different forms of masks, costumes, and dances. Those from the Northern Region wear masks constructed from animal hides and hair, or they just paint their faces. Those from the Brong-Ahafo Region appear in war dress—with a wrapper tied around their waists and metal bells on their boots or ankles—without a mask. Members

Children dancing in a street parade on New Year's Eve, Saltpond, Ghana, 2011. Photograph by Courtnay Micots.

dance and sing yet have no brass band. Thus, the conceptualization of "fancy dress" is quite different from that in the coastal regions. The Centre for National Culture, Central Region, may have pre-NFAC competitions, normally held a few months before the NFAC competitions, to determine the best groups. Winners of the pre-NFAC competitions receive funding for travel to the final event as well as food and accommodation. Additional Fancy Dress competitions have taken place in Cape Coast during 2009's Fetu Afahy, an important festival in early September, and on Christmas Day in 2010. Winners of the competitions in Cape Coast receive a trophy cup (only after three near-consecutive wins) and bragging rights. A mock competition is held in Elmina at Christmas.

Most Fancy Dress members have at least one group father who oversees the troupe as a whole. The group mother oversees food preparation. As a rule, the group father is initially the founder of the group, and the mother is his wife or another close female relative. After they pass away or step down, the position is elected. Additionally, other positions are elected. The Fancy Dress chairman or president is responsible for the general organization. The bandleader is in charge of the music and band organization. Adult performers usually serve under the chairman or president and control the minitroupes and stilt walkers. Stilt walkers (*sakramodu*) are young men who perform a range of walks, dances, and special displays of ability on wooden stilts ranging from twelve to fifteen feet (four to five meters) in height. In the past many of those who control the minitroupes and stilt walkers dressed as Red Indians. In the early twenty-first century in Winneba, they are cowboys.

CHARACTERS

Initially, Hollywood films were shown only to children in the Christian missions, yet by the 1950s locals were watching these films in large cinema houses. Artists and groups were inspired to create a wide variety of characters. Saltpond groups have performed many roles throughout the years, including Jesus Christ, Herod, Pontius Pilate, Robin Hood, Moses, and the Red Indian. Although these characters were popular in the 1950s to the late 1970s, they are rarely performed in the early twenty-first century. New characters excite the crowd and are awarded greater dashes. Some characters, such as cowboys, Father Christmas, and Roman soldiers, have remained popular. The ability of individuals and groups to assimilate outside ideas and transform them into a new and dynamic art form demonstrates a long-held practice of selection and transformation found in many urbanized port cities along the transatlantic trade route. While it may appear to be a form of mimicry at first glance, these characters often demonstrate local aesthetic preferences and the current sociopolitical situation.

Participants dress as characters that will both excite and scare their audience, consequently garnering the largest dashes. As such, the popularity of various characters fluctuates over time. The costumes and masks change each year, or new characters are developed to enliven the visual spectacle and performance. The earliest costumes were varied, inventive, and expensive. A photograph from 1941 depicts members of the Winneba Red Cross No. 4 group dressed in character, including a ship's captain, sailors, British officers, King George VI, Queen Elizabeth II, Prince Philip Duke of Edinburgh, an archbishop (possibly William Temple), men dressed as white women, and a cowboy. A large wooden ship was constructed to celebrate the first performance of the Red Cross, named after the ship that brought the masquerade materials to Winneba's port in the late 1930s and into the 1940s. Early characters seem to been inspired primarily by the British Navy, seen in the ports, and British royal figures, seen and described often in magazines and newspapers, as Ghana was a British colony from 1874 to 1957.

Cowboys and Indians were played everywhere by numerous ethnic groups, including Europeans and Africans. Additionally, Indian characters were performed throughout the Caribbean in (at least) Jamaica, St. Kitts-Nevis, Bermuda, the Dominican Republic, and also Brazil by the late nineteenth century. Battles between cowboys and Indians were romanticized versions of North American colonization made popular through mass-produced commercial imports from North America—product labels, posters, dime novels, magazines, and the cinema. These items circulated widely in the Atlantic beginning in the nineteenth century, including books like those by James Fenimore Cooper and magazines such as *Harper's Weekly*, which produced numerous prints by Frederic Remington. These images popularized the North American West and the Plains warrior.

By the mid-1930s the Indian character was being performed in Ghana at the port of Saltpond. Characters known as Red Indians or Wild Indians are remembered as wearing dress similar to that used for performances in the Caribbean from the 1930s to the 1970s. While this may link the origin more closely with the Caribbean and Jonkonnu traditions, it is important to note that many of the same masks and costume materials, like peacock feathers and small bells, were provided by the same trading vessels that sailed to Atlantic ports. The popularity of this fierce warrior type spread quickly to other coastal towns. During the same period growing frustrations with the British colonizer were resulting in the development of nationalist political

Fire talks to a Holy Cities Fancy Dress member wearing an imported Joker mask along the route during Bakatue in Elmina on 9 July 2011. Photograph by Courtnay Micots.

movements. Performance events like Fancy Dress and Carnival, and warrior characters emanating from the lower classes, tend to negotiate power. Each artist interpreted the Native American image differently, with costumes and performances varying greatly. Feathers, usually in the headdress, served as the single common element identifying the Red Indian character in the Caribbean, Brazil, and Ghana.

Winneba groups create new and different exciting characters for Masquefest each year. Red Cross claims to have been the first group to perform the Red Indian in competition in 1958. However, the Nobles say they originated this character type in the mid-1960s. Both claim inspiration from books, magazines, and American films. The Nobles originally commissioned Atto Donko, a Fante shoemaker, to make a Red Indian costume based on a photograph in a magazine. After Donko's death they employed Mr. Odum, one of the members of the group. Costumes and masks are created for minitroupes of three or four maskers who perform within the group and have special responsibilities. In the twenty-first century, a minitroupe from the Nobles plays the Red Indian, while Red Cross includes a minitroupe of cowboys. The Red Indian character, even when it does not resemble a Native American, allowed locals to transform into a persona that whites would not consider threatening but that could act out all the aggressive behaviors and warriorlike imagery that the people could not express outwardly in other contexts during colonial rule. It has continued after independence when such imagery has been needed for unity during political and economic instability. In the early twenty-first century, during peaceful and more prosperous times, the Red Indian has faded as a popular character, while the cowboy has grown in popularity. These types share the qualities of fierce and courageous warriors.

COSTUMES AND MASKS

Tailors, often group members, sew the costumes in the early twenty-first century. Usually, men and women wear similar costumes, yet in the coastal town of Saltpond, women wear striped attire contrasting with the men's patchwork-style costumes. Group portraits of unmasked participants are common in the early twenty-first century, though prior to the 1980s masqueraders kept their identity secret. Although some groups perform religious rituals beforehand to ensure their safety, the secular nature of this art form allows the identity of the masker to be known to the public. In fact, members often remove their masks, wearing them back on the head like a hat, while performing due to the heat. They will gladly pull the mask down for enthusiastic dancing and for tourists taking photographs, expecting a generous dash.

Four types of facial masks are created and worn for performances in Ghana in the early twenty-first century: wire-mesh, papier-mâché, cloth, and, more rarely, leather masks. The first two are formed over a mold, whereas cloth and leather masks are cut and stitched. Performers generally favor rubber animal or horror masks, purchased in Accra or Takoradi or imported from North America and given to the members by friends, relatives, and patrons. The majority of these masks originate in China.

The first masks 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, originally used for Austrian characters, German Carnival (Fasching), or various Hindi deities. According to Kodwi Antwi Baiden, a tailor living in Saltpond, early masks with multiple faces were once imported from India. The earliest mask was recognizable by its long nose, long ears, open mouth, and three faces. Another mask depicting a devil, or *sesebonsem*, was worn on top of it. Devil characters that entertain the audience with dances, jokes, and acrobatics are popular along the West African coastline and elsewhere. Baiden noted that this character in Saltpond was meant to scare people, especially children, but also to entertain. Thus, imported masks have always been favored. In fact, festivals and masking in the Caribbean shared the use of these imported masks and other products, for they were connected through British colonialism due to the substantial trade and commerce that occurred in the British Caribbean islands, Ghana, Nigeria, and India.

The founder and president of the Holy Cities group in Cape Coast is Fire, also known as Kwesi Kaya Anas. His moniker comes from his regular employment as a fireman. When he is off duty, he runs the Holy Cities Academy Masquerade Society in Cape Coast. The 2011 tailor for Holy Cities was Fire's son, Papa Kwesi Banya. When Christmas neared, the living room of their small house was turned into the "engine room" with Papa Kwesi busy repairing old and sewing new costumes. Whenever possible, they purchase new wire-mesh masks in Takoradi, made by Ekow Kon. In Saltpond, tailor Francis Kodwo Coker sews Fancy Dress costumes for local groups as well as for two groups in Tema. His younger brothers, living in Chicago, bring him rubber horror

masks and various props, like a plastic Roman soldier's helmet, sold in the United States.

The prohibitive cost of some costumes may either cause changes in the ensemble or end the performance of that type. For example, the Winneba Red Cross has not performed Queen Elizabeth II since 2007. Her character wore a white shiny dress and crown made from very expensive materials, including silver and brass ornamentation. This was paired with a papier-mâché mask crafted in Swedru, a town north of Winneba. Red Indian costumes became increasingly more expensive to create, especially after the economic depression of the 1980s. Peacock and ostrich feathers were hard to find. Imported seed beads, used on costumes and boots, also became more expensive. Additionally, some of the members who wore these early costumes moved and took their costumes with them. It was too expensive for members to recreate new costumes. Therefore, costumes in the twenty-first century have become more generalized so that the masks, headdresses, and props can be readily switched. Those outside Winneba tend to resemble "simple dress" with colorful patchwork, long sleeves, and pants made from colorful cotton trade cloth. Simple dress is believed to have originated in Winneba, yet costumes vary greatly between Winneba and other coastal towns. Masqueraders usually wear tennis shoes and sneakers, but for characters performed in Winneba, as was done in the past, covers resembling short boots, crafted from cardboard, foam, and colored paper, are worn. They could be decorated with fringed material, lace, feathers, and garlands. In the past small beads were glued on to create small animal, vegetal, or geometric motifs.

Winneba costumes have retained many elements of the older styles. Original costumes for the Roman soldier, a character inspired by mid-twentieth-century Hollywood films, included shorts, hats or helmets, capes, and special sandals. A commander would have short boots, a shield, and a "short spear," or sword. The main elements of these costumes continue, with pants instead of shorts and larger, more elaborate headdresses. Bollywood has also inspired new characters and costumes, such as the Red Cross character called Albella. Most characters wear colorful Christmas garlands, glass balls, jingle bells, and other festive materials amassed in profusion on hats formed of construction paper and covered with shiny paper. Mirrors, important for their shine, may be attached. Red Indian masqueraders also carried a cardboard bow and stick arrows covered with shiny paper. "Shiny" is a quality deemed most important. Many of the feathers used in the early twenty-first century come from decorative boas found in American craft stores and sent to members by friends and relatives. Appliquéd 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.

Depending on the size, condition, and amount of elaboration, costumes may cost US$100. Masks may cost as much as US$50. According to Fataawu Belloe, group father and former chairman of Winneba's Red Cross, he and his older brother Luise Abeaku Yamoah made his Roman soldier costume for the 2011 Masquefest for about US$200 in materials. Considering the income of the mostly working-class members (UNICEF estimated the average Ghanaian's salary to be US$700 a year in 2009), this is a considerable investment. Therefore, the most elaborate costumes generally belong to performers who possess a trade and earn a considerably higher income. Belloe belongs to a royal family, completed a two-year college degree in electrical engineering, owns a successful sound electronics business, and is part of Ghana's growing middle class. These leaders often partially or entirely fund costumes and fees for other members (usually the children of lower-income families). Leaders are always looking for private patrons and costume collectors to finance their endeavors.

Members of the Red Cross No. 4 Fancy Dress group, dressed as Robin Hood and a Roman soldier, are ready for the Winneba competition, ca. 1975–1977. Unknown photographer.

Fancy Dress continues to grow in popularity in the early twenty-first century while the characters and meanings constantly change. Political characters have evolved from British royalty to local presidents such as Kwame Nkrumah, J. J. Rawlings, and John Kufuor. Each is known by their specific costume and papier-mâché likeness. Representative of their eras and usual public attire, Nkrumah wears kente cloth, Rawlings a soldier's uniform, and Kufuor a Western-style tailored business suit. U.S. presidents are equally popular as Fancy Dress characters, including George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama, identified by their likeness in either locally made papier-mâché masks or rubber masks imported from the United States. While entertainment is the main function of this performance, politics

and political figures have always been open to commentary and humor through art.

PERFORMANCE

Street parading involves periods of walking interspersed with intense dancing in front of chiefs' palaces and hotels and in public squares. During the July festival known as Bakatue in Elmina, a variety of events are held over a period of six days from Tuesday to Sunday. A parade, or *durbar*, of local chiefs carried in their palanquins is held in the old town on Tuesday, but the larger durbar takes place on Saturday afternoon through the main thoroughfares of Elmina. Fancy Dress groups, overseen by Fire (not in costume), conduct their street-parading event in the morning. Masqueraders and their hired brass band consisting of about five members convene in front of a subchief's palace. Once they begin, the members walk and dance through the streets of the old town. They stop at various points, when the band plays vigorous music to which several members break into frenzied dancing, quickly drawing a crowd. Members of the crowd may dance with the performers. The masquerading children, who carry small wooden boxes or tin cans with slits at the top, collect dashes. One stop will be made at a local bar, where the adults collect the monies from the children to purchase refreshments, such as alcohol and water, for the entire group. The masqueraders complete their two-hour parade with a "march pass," an organized configuration where members form two lines and quick-step down Liverpool Street toward the palace of Elmina's chief Kodwo Kondiwa. Afterward, some masqueraders rest, while others cause traffic jams, soliciting funds from drivers and passengers on the main road. After about an hour, the great durbar begins. Fancy Dress members follow behind with their stilt walker, or *sakramodu*, who has now joined them. The durbar ends at the grounds in front of Elmina Castle, where speeches are held throughout the late afternoon. As the chiefs arrive, each one is paraded in the center of the grouping of tents and chairs. The stilt walker completes the parade with a demonstration of his skills in this makeshift arena. For weeks beforehand, group members meet in secret to practice the choreography for street parading and competitions alike.

Winneba masqueraders parade through town in their old costumes from December 25 to 28 to collect funds for the annual January 1 competition, part of the city's New Year celebrations. Groups of colorfully dressed masqueraders march past the judges in the University of Education's Advanced Teacher Training College Park (also known as Advanced Park). An initial inspection of costumes is followed by a "march pass" and three different types of dancing, which are all judged. The large brass bands each group hires play popular tunes like "Jingle Bells" in a blues or highlife style. (*Highlife* is a musical genre that combines elements of Fante drumming with Western melodies.) After the march, members dance prechoreographed steps to slow dance or blues, highlife, and speed dance (atwim). The dance dramas relate to the songs played by the live band. Stilt walkers form part of each group and perform on wooden stilts ranging from twelve to fifteen feet (four to five meters) in height. The costumes, music, and dance steps reflect the joyous occasion. The entire town, along with tourists, 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. All four groups (Nobles No. 1, Egyaa No. 2, Tumus No. 3, and Red Cross No. 4), consisting of men, women, and children, compete. Each wins a trophy and a share of the admission proceeds. On January 2 they come to town again in their new costumes—the ones they competed in the day before—to dance in the main streets to boast with their trophy and gather additional dashes. Some members sell their old costumes and masks to new members, to people in nearby towns, or to dealers and collectors in Accra.

Brass military bands were introduced to the Ghanaian coast in the 1880s by the West Indian Rifle Regiment; many members were freed slaves recruited to reinforce British troops in Ghana in order to suppress Asante forces. Band members play mostly trumpets, trombones, bass and snare drums, and other percussion instruments. In street parades the band does not dress in costume, though they may feel inspired to dance along. In competitions they wear matching T-shirts and pants, and they march, not dance, behind their Fancy Dress group. Masqueraders must pay for the cost of the band in addition to annual fees and for the cost of food for the group during practices and the event. They are also responsible for their costumes and masks. Because of the considerable costs involved, members do not join lightly. While participants rely heavily on patron and donor support, they may also receive funds through competition or paid performances in other cities that do not have a Fancy Dress group. The competition's increasing size and reputation brings financial opportunities to the city and its inhabitants, yet it has not drawn wide foreign interest.

References and Further Reading

Brown, Kwesi Ewusi. "Social Conflicts within Contemporary Effutu Festivals." Master's thesis, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Kentucky, 2005.

Cole, Catherine M. *Ghana's Concert Party Theatre*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.

Cole, Herbert M. "The Art of Festival in Ghana." *African Arts* 8, no. 3 (Spring 1975): 12–23, 60–62, 90.

Cole, Herbert M., and Doran H. Ross. "Fancy Dress." In *The Arts of Ghana*, 179–186. Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, University of California, 1977.

Kedjanyi, John. "Observations on Spectator-Performer Arrangements of Some Traditional Ghanaian Performances." *Research Review* 2, no. 3 (1966): 61–66.

Kedjanyi, John. "Masquerade Societies in Ghana." *Okyeame* 4 (1968): 85–88.

Labi, Kwame A. "Criminalizing Art: The Struggle between Fante Asafo Companies and the British Administration on the Gold Coast (1844–1957)." *Baessler-Archiv* 50 (2002): 153–168.

Micots, Courtnay. "Performing Ferocity: Fancy Dress, Asafo and Red Indians in Ghana." *African Arts* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 14–25.

Nicklin, Keith, and Jill Salmons. "Hippies of Elmina." *African Arts* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 60–65, 95.

Ross, Doran H. *Fighting with Art: Appliquéd Flags of the Fante Asafo*. Los Angeles: University of California Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1979.

Thompson, Robert Farris. *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.

Courtnay Micots