

Snapshot: Masquefest 2012

The Masquefest competition in Winneba, Ghana, can be described as both a fancy dress street parade and a youth sports club event. The competition, which takes place on New Year's Day, includes dance elements of the street parade—march pass, highlife, and *atwim* (speed dance)—and forms of the carnivalesque, public education, and the involvement of traditional local religion. Masquefest, organized by the Winneba Masquerade Federation, incorporates five essential events performed in this order: inspection, march pass, slow dance or blues, highlife, and *atwim*. 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, and inventive costume design.

According to the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, the carnivalesque practiced in popular culture overturns ready-made truths. Therefore, men become women, fools become wise, beggars become kings, and the figures of heaven and hell (angels and devils) mingle. In the street parades across the coast of Ghana, as well as in other masquerades in the Black Atlantic region, angel and especially devil characters are popular. Some of the characters intentionally mock or present a satirical challenge to authority and the traditional social hierarchy. For example, in Masquefest 2011, the dance group Red Cross 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 gods, and libations and prayers for the protection of the community for another year are performed. Red Cross used a four-foot- (1.2-meter-) tall teddy bear in place of the antelope for their parody. However, the public also understood that it was a statement meant for the town leaders who, because of a "stool" (leadership) dispute, had not performed Aboakyir since 2009. Red Cross won Masquefest 2011. The stool dispute was resolved by October 2011, and Aboakyir took place in May 2012.

Educational messages are also incorporated into the performances. In the 2008 competition, Egyaa won first place after performing a drama on HIV awareness with masqueraders dressed as the individual letters *H*, *I*, and *V*. Others wore cardboard signs around their necks with educational messages regarding safe sex practices and AIDS statistics. These skits and signs are also utilized during the victory street parades performed the day following the competition. For the 2012 competition (held on 2 January because the 1st was a Sunday), the Red Cross group chose to present an educational message regarding fishing practices, for Winneba, located on the water, is primarily a fishing town. 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 fishing practices that the government has deemed illegal.

Other skits during Masquefest 2012 related to traditional practices. Tumus greeted judges in the inspection with a



Masquefest 2012 inspection, Red Cross member. Photograph by Courtnay Micots.

three-year-old masquerader dressed in traditional kente cloth offering each a drink of palm wine. The judges took a sip and poured the rest on the ground for the ancestors. This traditional practice was well received by the judges and the crowd, who cheered. The Nobles also honored local traditional medicine. One of the masqueraders dressed as a medical patient who wheeled himself onto the grounds during the slow dance event. He fell out of the wheelchair onto the ground and struggled to get up. Another masquerader dressed as a local priest came and performed his magic, transforming the paraplegic, who jumped up from the ground able to walk and dance.

Local medicine, or *juju*, and religious customs are also practiced in less visible and positive ways. The use of *juju* is practiced among some of the Fancy Dress members, though none will admit this openly. While *juju* can be used to enhance one's performance, it can also be used to make an opponent sick or even cause him or her to die. Four days before the Masquefest 2012 event, Fataawu Belloe fell ill with malaria. Although he is no longer the chairman for Red Cross and serves as the group father, Belloe is well known as a successful choreographer for the group, having created the Aboakyir skit and others, often in the last days before the competition. Through the insistence of his mother, Belloe saw a local priest, who divined that members from another group had performed *juju* against him to make him ill. With assistance from the local hospital, however, Belloe recovered

and was able to create the fishing drama the night before the competition.

On the flip side of Masquefest, Fancy Dress operates as a youth sports club. Anyone can join any group, regardless of dancing ability, sex, or religion. Membership consists of mostly primary and secondary school students, ages six to twenty. All group leaders require their young members to attend school and achieve good grades. Leaders work in conjunction with the parents, usually former members, to encourage the children to join the Fancy Dress groups, paying the entrance fee and the costs for the costumes. Students who do not obey the rules are “sacked” from the group. Girls and women began to join these largely all-male groups in the twenty-first century.

Training for the competition begins as early as August with meetings every evening and sometimes also on weekend mornings for about two hours. A couple of members will play makeshift drums to provide rhythm. One or more trainers work in conjunction with the group leaders to create the choreography and select music, but members are allowed to

submit ideas. One group also jogs in the early morning as a team throughout the town. Teamwork is important. Leaders work hard to keep disagreements between members at a minimum, and since synchronized dancing is an important element in the judging, members have to work together to develop this skill. Last, stamina and strength are required to sustain a high level of performance for five hours during the competition in the humidity and hot sun.

The Masquefest 2012 winners were Tumus, Red Cross, Nobles, and Egyaa, in that order. All groups received a trophy to carry in the parade held the following day. They must return the trophies to the federation afterward. Trophies can be kept only after a team wins in three near-consecutive years. Stadium costs are taken from the ticket proceeds, and then the federation and the four teams divide the rest evenly. Donations made to the federation and groups also assist to subsidize the event.

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