

Power and Play

Fancy Dress Carnival in Ghana

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all photos by the author except where otherwise noted

Fancy Dress Carnival is a multimedia spectacle wherein masked performers don costumes and dance down the street or compete in an arena with accompanying musicians, usually a brass band, delighting Ghanaian audiences (Fig. 1). Fancy Dress is a distinctive form of carnival¹ belonging to Ghana with a deep history that stems from both international and local practices. What sets Fancy Dress apart from other African masquerades are the carnivalesque meanings that connect it to other Black Atlantic carnivals. The colorful costumes, characters, and other fancy aspects exhibiting “play” and fierce characters expressing “power” interact with their spectators as a means to negotiate community identity, demonstrating a complicated relationship with Europe and the United States. Fancy Dress is a form of *kakaamotobe*, an umbrella term for a fierce display through costume, music, and dance found throughout the country.²

The carnival started around the turn of the twentieth century as a combination of local religious and performance practices with foreign carnival forms. Local performances include those primarily from Fante *asafo*, paramilitary troops with religious and communal responsibilities, but also from Nzema and Ga practices along the coast.³ British sailors and officers, West Indian troops, Afro-Brazilians and others came to the coast in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries bringing with them their comedic skits, carnival, and British Fancy Dress.⁴ The Fante, one of several Akan groups in southern Ghana, occupy part of the coastline in the Central Region (Fig. 2). Energized by these popular forms of expression, the local Fante created their own version of Fancy Dress to release tensions built during British colonization.⁵ As Doran H. Ross aptly stated, the Fante of coastal Ghana, formerly the Gold Coast Colony, were “fighting with art” (Ross 1979).

Masquerade can manipulate the space for empowerment, and through “selective amnesia” participants and spectators can reinvent a more acceptable memory (than perhaps one of disempowerment) that suits the community (Njoku 2020: 190–92), which is often the case with Black Atlantic carnivals that use

performance as a healing tonic from the cultural trauma suffered during the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism. Theater in the streets as a performance conducted by the oppressed empowers participants and spectators as a therapeutic form of activism (Boal 1985: 122). Because characters allow performers to enact their desires and frustrations on the streets, Fancy Dress operates as theatrical activism to heal communities and thus has thrived for over a century.

Multimedia events incorporating music, dance, costume, and skits provide a mechanism for letting off steam by revealing what is hidden from view. The hidden and unexpected are considered dangerous in many communities. Different rules exist during liminal periods such as those created by a masquerade; chaos creates a new order and is a source of power used to counter these dangerous forces (Kasfir 1988: 8). Ghana’s youth embrace this power through play by bringing long-established forms to the contemporary moment through the utilization of foreign visual culture, elaborate costumes, masks and brass bands. Like Black Atlantic carnivals elsewhere, Fancy Dress expresses a sense of joy and unity while it also releases tensions at many sociopolitical levels.

SAKROBUNDI: INDIGENOUS MASQUERADE INFORMS FANCY DRESS

Masquerade for purposes of spiritual protection and/or socially corrective forces has existed for more than a century among Fante and related Akan groups. Fancy Dress animal characters and stilt walkers, or *sakromodu* (s. *sakrabodu*),⁶ are fierce characters with potential historical ties to the *sakrobundi* (Fig. 3), a character popular in the north that may have transferred south to the coast in the late-nineteenth century, possibly influencing the Fancy Dress stilt walker characters we see today. While the antics of wild animal masqueraders who roll on the ground and chase spectators are deemed playful, they are also considered dangerous untamed beasts who emerge from the bush to scare children and sometimes adults into submitting to cultural and social mores (Fig. 4).⁷ Likewise, the acrobatics of *sakromodu* are enjoyed, yet behind the scenes these performers must seek protection from harm through Christian prayer, libations poured to honor ancestors and local deities, and/or “by swallowing herbal medicine.”⁸ The initial function of wild animals and *sakramodu* may be a distant memory today to many spectators, and even performers, yet today’s practices hint to an original function in “witch-hunting.”⁹

Contemporary *asafo* performance of wild animal characters with carved wooden masks and natural fiber costumes called *sakramodu* or *sakrobundi* may be a century-long practice

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I Colorful masqueraders of the Red Cross No. 4 group take to the streets in Fancy Dress costume after the 2011 Masquefest competition in Winneba, Ghana. January 3, 2012.

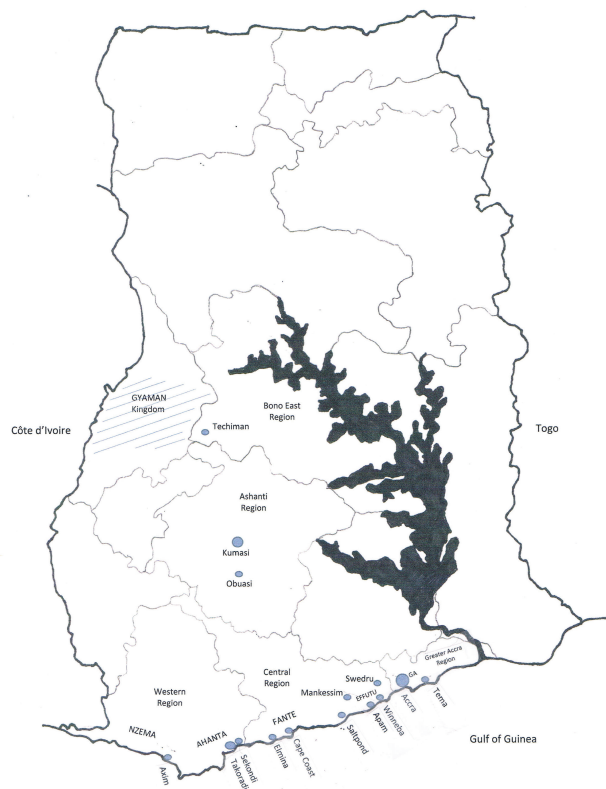
on the coast, originating from Akan-related groups in the central northeast area of Ghana. In 1889 colonial surgeon Richard Austin Freeman recorded an Akan performance in Odumase (near Techiman) involving one masquerader, the *sakrobundi*, in a long fiber costume wearing a large wooden mask representing “the head of an antelope with incurved horns ... or a more or less grotesque human face surmounted by the characteristic horns” (Freeman 1967: 148–49). Dancers wearing fiber skirts encircled this fierce masquerader and “during the dance stooped down and made a show of sweeping the ground” with a fiber broom (Freeman 1967: 148–49).

Similar performances designed to drive evil away from the community found their way from Côte d’Ivoire to the Gold Coast. These performance rituals, including a masquerade called Yoggon, were imported into Gyaman¹⁰ from the Senufo (Côte d’Ivoire) and used by the Abbron, Kulango, and Nafana peoples (bordering Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana) in the last half of the nineteenth century. Sie Kwaku (ca. 1845–after 1908) first practiced Yoggon, but he soon embraced the new witch-finding power of *sakrobundi* (*sakra* meaning to turn away from and *bone* for wickedness/evil). *Sakrobundi* was popular in the Gyaman area and spread to the town of Welekei. Two masks came into use in

Welekei—Kumbi in the form of a hyena, and another representing an antelope or wild ox. Sie Kwaku was in charge of the shrine housing the masks and led *Sakrobundi* masquerades. He stated that he was “helping *Sakrobudi* fetish in doing good to all to bring a blessing of peace and prosperity in destroying of witches to every town” (McCaskie 2004: 85–87, 90–92).¹¹

Widely popular, *sakrobundi* spread southward. By 1890, British officials reported they were worried about the growing influence of *sakrobundi* in the coastal town of Winneba, about 200 miles southeast of Welekei. *Sakrobundi* was flourishing into the 1920s and ‘30s until French colonial officers and Catholic missionaries pressured for its termination in the Bron Region. According to T.C. McCaskie, *sakrobundi* was initially successful for “its reputation for witch-finding, but its procedural impartiality also conferred upon it the status of a guardian of moral goodness and communal harmony” (McCaskie 2004: 93–94).

Ross documented a female/male pair of wood-carved horizontal bush-cow masks partnered with costumes of natural fiber performed by the Amafo No. 2 *asafo* company in Cape Coast in 1976. Another pair of wooden deer masks with natural fiber costumes was performed by an *asafo* company in Enyan Abassa in 1978. Also in the Central Region, a masquerader in Mankessim wore a horizontal wooden bush-cow mask with a cloth costume for a Kyirem No. 2 *asafo* performance in 1979 (Ross 1979). According to Silvia Forni and Ross (2017), *asafo* companies perform these animal characters or spirits, referred to as *sakramodu*, in pairs or singly occasionally. Similar to my initial findings with Fancy



2 Map of Ghana
Drawing: author 2020

3 Illustration of an Akan masquerader wearing a fiber costume and large wooden mask with composite bush cow and human facial traits. 1889, Odumase, Ghana.
Drawing: Richard Austin Freeman 1967, p. 155

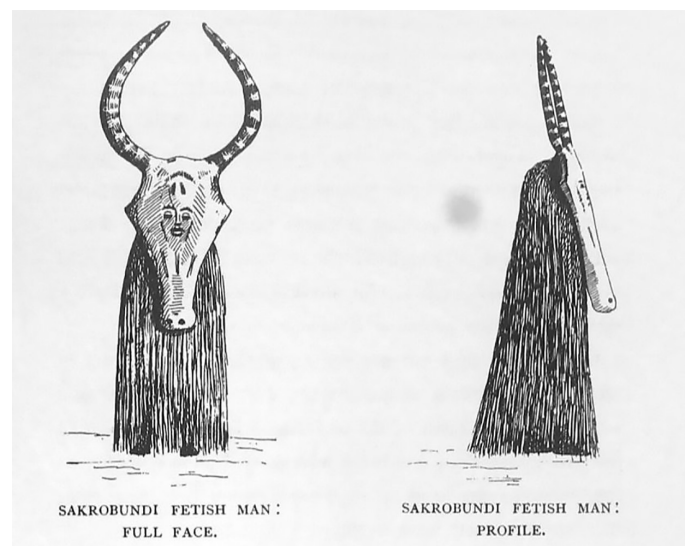
Dress, local colleagues interpreted these masquerades for Forni and Ross as “just for fun” or “to scare children.”¹²

The Fancy Dress function of locating and driving away evil-doers in a town may be historical or kept secret from the community at large, yet the ideas of bringing goodness and harmony to the community continue to be assigned to wild animals and *sakramodu* today. *Sakramodu* may seek protection prior to events, and they are guarded by organizers and other masqueraders, usually Scout or Cowboy characters today, for both practical and religious reasons. Uncle Ekow Ackon, a Fante healer or *ninsinyi*, is a former Fancy Dresser and captain of his *asafo* company Wombir No. 2 in Elmina.¹³ Fancy Dressers come to him for protection during performance though it was more common in the past. They swallow an herbal medicine that “fortifies” the performer and protects them from harm. Using his *sidur*, a power object with attached animal hair, shells, and medicinal bundles, Ackon creates medicinal concoctions with prayers to the *abosom*, or local deities, for assistance. *Sakramodu* may drink a different medicine or wear a talisman, usually herbs stuffed into a small leather pouch. In the past, some masqueraders wore leaves around their necks during performances. The *sakramodu* must be protected from “witches” in the audience, who can cause him to fall into an invisible hole on their path. A *ninsinyi* “can make the leg break ... can use [a *sidur*] for good or evil.”¹⁴ A *sidur* is a power object, much like Akan *suman* described by R. Sutherland Rattray (1969: 11–12, 17–24). Thus, when scouts surround a *sakrabodu*, they not only clear a path within the audience, but also guard the performer from invisible holes with a ring of spiritual protection (Micots 2021: 76–78). This may be similar to the ring of dancers who performed around the masquerader witnessed by Freeman.

The character, rituals and choreography of the Fancy *ɔkomfo* may display a spiritual, protective function (Fig. 5).¹⁵ Noted *sakrabodu* Kow Atta performs on 14-foot-high stilts. He protects himself from falls during performances with prayers to God beforehand. While he knows some *sakramodu* seek protection from the local healer, as a Christian he believes “God blesses me.”¹⁶ He enjoys wearing either of two costumes—one depicting an *ɔkomfo*, a priest engaged in local religious practices, or one similar to the Ghanaian flag in red, gold, and green with a black star. On the ground or on stilts, the *ɔkomfo* character is one to be feared and respected. A Fancy *ɔkomfo* wears a raffia skirt and crossed baldrics like the local priest (Fig. 6), but the masquerader either paints his face, all or partially white, or wears a mask. During performance the character may be involved in a skit or act individually by circling the group.¹⁷

PARTICIPANTS AND EVENTS

Fancy Dress is a voluntary secular organization composed of men and women who range in age, yet the majority are children and youths up to their thirties. Most identify themselves as Fante, yet members from Effutu, Ahanta, Ga, and other ethnicities are also involved. Many of the adults work as fishermen, carpenters, tailors, and in other trades, or are unemployed, or find work occasionally. In other words, they come from humble economic classes. Those who fare better, usually the middle class, help with financial support. Fancy Dress extends into towns across the coast beyond the Central Region into Tema in the Greater Accra Region to the east and Sekondi-Takoradi in the Western Region. More than 100 members may participate in each. Groups tend to form, split, and disintegrate regularly, and members may or may not participate in an event.





After independence in 1957, President Kwame Nkrumah's administration began organizing the Independence Day celebrations for 1958. Winning groups in Fancy Dress competitions held in southern regions were rewarded with performing in the celebration parade.²⁰ Masquefest is the only competition that has been held annually on New Year's Day since 1958, when the Winneba Masquerade Federation was created to oversee the groups and formal competition. Five groups, each with about 80–100 performers, dance in front of judges at University of Education's Advanced Teacher Training College Park (see Fig. 5). Masqueraders and stilt walkers are judged in five categories: Inspection, March Pass, Blues or Slow Dance, Highlife, and

Atwim. The Federation successfully partnered with Nyce Media in 2016. Nyce provides sponsors, publicity, logistics, security, and ticket sales onsite and online. Funds were used to construct a heritage house for Fancy Dress offices and a museum. Both Carnival as Festival and Masquefest draw large crowds of Ghanaians, including those from abroad.

Winneba groups create new and exciting costumes for the competitive Masquefest event that more closely align with earlier Fancy Dress costuming aesthetics (see Fig. 1). These costumes consist of pantaloons, short or long, with a shirt or tunic and perhaps a vest, boots, gloves and a headdress, all with a sense of shine and accumulation. Yet, costumes outside Winneba have become more generalized since the mid-twentieth century as an assemblage of colorful patchwork known as "Simple Dress" (Figs. 7–8).²¹

Fancy Dressers appear primarily during the holiday season around Christmas and New Year's Day and during the town's primary harvest festival parade. Takoradi's Carnival as Festival and Winneba's Masquefest are the largest Fancy Dress events and are unique in how they are funded and organized. The twin cities of Sekondi and Takoradi have thirty-two active Fancy Dress groups wearing Simple Dress costumes who parade through local neighborhoods. Since the sponsorship and establishment of Carnival as Festival by Skyy Media Group in 2005, the groups now combine in a parade down four blocks of an old street in Takoradi on Boxing Day, the day after Christmas (Fig. 9). The carnival has developed into a huge annual event including the parade and stage performances.¹⁹

Groups are named, inspired by local and imported ideas. Early Saltpond groups included the Red Indians, Chinese, Anchors, and Tumus.¹⁸ The Chinese are the longest continuously performing Fancy Dress group on the coast, having formed in 1923. Today, the Chinese, the Great Justice, Holy Cities, and a newly created Tumus perform in Saltpond. The numbers following the group names in Winneba—Nobles No. 1, Egyaa No. 2, Tumus No. 3, Red Cross No. 4, and Royals No. 5—reflect the order in which those groups developed, yet the numbering resembles those assigned to *asafo* by the colonial administration.

4 Shredded cloth or hairy fiber costumes; locally made *papier-mâché* or imported, foreign, rubber masks; and gloves with long red finger-nails comprise the fierce Animal character ensemble. The Great Animal Kingdom, Red Cross No. 4, Masquefest 2014, Winneba, Ghana.

5 A stilt walker, or *sakrabodu*, performing as an *ɔkomfo* character in Fancy Dress. Nobles No. 1, Masquefest 2012, Winneba, Ghana.





CHARACTERS EXPRESS HERITAGE AND MODERNITY

Some Fancy Dress characters allow individuals to express modernity independently and collectively as a troupe or a larger group. The youngest performers are guided by their older friends and group leaders, while others make conscious choices about the characters and masks they will don for an event. African modernity has largely been understood as European and American oppression in contrast to African experiences during premodern contact with these forces; this occurred during periods of transatlantic slavery, colonialism, and/or imperialism. Critiques of this oppression abound and calls for cultural revivalism have blanketed postcolonial discussions. Modernity as a predicament may result in “a perspective of radical difference or alterity” and spur social change or frustration (Imafidon 2020: 172–73). In parades and on the competitive field, these forces are played out by Fancy Dressers and the costumes they wear.²² It would be a mistake to see the characters as mimicry because they are defined and articulated by local aesthetic preferences and current sociopolitical and religious situations. Characters may be fancy or fierce, or display aspects of both, as seen with the *sakramodu*.

6 An actual *ɔkomfo* for Kyirem No. 6 *asafo* company, with Monica Blackmun Visonà at Akwambo on July 24, 2009 in Anomabo, Ghana.

7 Simple Dress costumes are “modern” costumes invented by Saltpond tailor John Kwaa Coker sometime in the 1950s. Elmina, Ghana. Photo: Herbert M. Cole, 1972

Initially Hollywood films were shown on the Gold Coast to children in the Christian missions, yet by the 1950s, locals were watching these films in large cinema houses. Artists were inspired to create a wide variety of characters, such as Jesus Christ, Herod, Pontius Pilate, Roman Soldier, Robin Hood, Moses, and the Red Indian (Fig. 10). Although these characters were popular in the 1950s through the ‘70s, some are rarely performed today. New characters excite the crowd and are awarded greater dashes, or tips. Characters such as Cowboys, Father Christmas, and the Roman Soldier have remained popular (Fig. 11).²³ Such characters celebrate the heritage of Fancy Dress, while new ones express contemporary ideas.

No celebration of the past is complete without honoring the ancestors through movement, cloth, and transformation, aspects important in both *asafo* and Fancy Dress. For the 2016 holidays, Francis Kodwo Coker, or “Kodzi,” created Simple Dress costumes in what he calls the *kente* style for the Chinese group in Saltpond (Fig. 12). Among the Akan, *kente* is a strip-woven cloth associated with leadership arts and historically worn by chiefs, queen mothers, and other royal dignitaries. In his invention, Kodzi has interspersed a blue-and-white patterned cloth between various badges and pleated fringe. While the cloth is not woven *kente* cloth, it reminds viewers of the patterns seen on older *kente* made with indigo weft patterns on white. This nod to local practices is met with approval from spectators and unifies the community through shared cultural pride.





8 Small jingle bells are attached to the back of these Simple Dress costumes, adding to the senses of accumulation and sound. Tumus, December 26, 2016, Takoradi, Ghana.

9 The Cosmos group proceed down Ankor Adjei Street during Carnival as Festival 2016 with masqueraders and a brass band on Boxing Day in Takoradi, Ghana.



Modernity was reflected in past parading events in Fancy Dress and *asafo* through Cowboy and Indian characters, romanticized versions of North American colonization made popular through mass-produced commercial imports from North America beginning in the nineteenth century—product labels, posters, dime novels, magazines, and the cinema. According to elders, the Indian character was being performed in Ghana by the mid-1930s. The popularity of these fierce warriors spread quickly to Gold Coast ports. Fancy Indians were free to perform “in a threatening manner with guns and swords” in Axim on Christmas Day in 1935 (Ward 1935). “Red Indians” or “Wild Indians” are remembered as wearing dress similar to those in Caribbean performances from the 1930s to ‘70s. The same masks and costume materials, like peacock feathers and small bells, were provided by trading vessels that sailed to Atlantic ports.²⁴

Cowboy and Red Indian characters appeared in both Fancy Dress and Fante *asafo* performances from the 1950s to ‘70s. Red Indians danced in circular fashion, carried bows and arrows or rifles, and made whooping noises. Although important differences exist between Fancy Dress and *asafo* characters, the shared act of circular parading has healing qualities (Micots 2012: 29–30). According to Robert Farris Thompson, “Processioning around a village can mystically heal its hidden problems, can ‘cool’ the entire settlement with circling gestures of felicity and good faith Circling the village brings the ancestral, otherworldly power back to the center” (Thompson 1988: 20). In this way, Fancy Dressers, like other Black Atlantic carnival performers, heal the community from trauma suffered from the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism.²⁵

The Morciet is a character created by performer Jacob Annobil

and his troupe for Masquefest 2017 (Fig. 13). The costume for this Africanfuturist “hermaphrodite hunter”²⁶ was inspired by a Ghanaian movie and is largely fashioned from pleather, the newest imported material on the market. The costume consists of layered pieces held together with shoe strings and is decorated with faux gold chains and plastic metallic ornaments. A long blonde braid, black high-heeled shoes, gloves, and a white wooden sword complete the ensemble. Fancy characters—the Morciet, Cowboys, American presidents, and Osama Bin Laden—are considered fierce global hunter-warriors who are powerful personas. However, the Morciet connects to the idea of an African alterity expressing a version of “Other” in the face of these foreign oppressors.

Gender inversion of males performing as Fancy female characters is common. Most of the younger children in Fancy Dress outside of Winneba wear Simple Dress costumes, paired with an inexpensive, wire-mesh mask painted with a female face (Fig. 14). This is a fun expression of young children as androgynous, which is accepted in the local culture. Fancy Dress female participants wear similar costumes as males, rather than skimpy outfits. Nudity as a commercial negotiation of an inverted power structure may be part of some Black Atlantic carnivals, but this structure relates to locations with a different history (Shrum and Kilburn 1996). Ghanaians would strongly disapprove of such exposure unless it were a male wearing provocative female clothing to parody ideas of morally incorrect behavior.²⁷ Cowgirls may wear skirts at the knee, but they can be performed by males or females (Fig. 15).

Males can perform as females to comment on social issues. For



example, Wedding Girl makes a serious comment on the state of relationships in the community and reinforces the social value of marriage before sex (Fig. 16, Cover). Performer Richard Bentum asked Augustina Mensah to sew a Cowgirl costume for himself and three male members in his troupe for Masquefest 2017.²⁸ The troupe added a parasol and plastic baby doll to the costume to expand its meaning. They renamed the Cowgirl costume to Wedding Girl as they wanted to “parody ... girls who have babies prior to marrying.”²⁹

The impact of Charismatic Christianity and prosperity gospel that has swept across southern Ghana in the past two decades appears in Fancy Dress.³⁰ In one example, the Holy Cities Academy Masquerade Society (Holy Cities) in Cape Coast have danced body masks depicting Angel and Jesus Christ characters constructed in *papier-mâché* (Fig. 17). Fancy Dress groups along the coast of Ghana

are composed of members who follow Christian, Muslim, and/or local practices. They work in harmony together, for “God is all one.” Holy Cities performs in town during holidays, but sometimes they are hired to perform at church events. According to the group leader, “When we use Jesus and [the] Angel it will attract people to follow or join us.” He would like to convert people and compares his group’s performance to those by Christian evangelists.³¹

(above)

10 Performers Elijah Paintsil as Robin Hood and to his right Kofi Tom Peter Paintsil as a Roman Soldier holds the winning plaque from Masquefest 1976, Winneba, Ghana.

Photo: Courtesy of Kofi Tom Peter Paintsil, 2009

11 Cowboys are identified by their vests and holsters with or without faux pistols.

Tumus No. 3, Masquefest 2012, Winneba, Ghana

(right)

12 Francis Kodwo “Kodzi” Coker wearing his creation of a Simple Dress costume in *kente* style with an Old Man rubber mask. 2016, Saltpond, Ghana.





13 One of a troupe of four masqueraders dressed as the Morciet, an Africanfuturist hermaphrodite hunter inspired by a Ghanaian movie. Tumus No. 3, Masquefest 2017, Winneba, Ghana.



14 Children often dance wearing Simple Dress costumes and wire mesh female-faced masks. Chinese, New Year's Eve 2011, Saltpond, Ghana.

Fierce animal characters are popular in Fancy Dress. Kwo-Tintin, a local deity who took the form of a wild bush animal, was a favorite character performed in the 1950s to '70s. The name suggests an influence from the popular Belgian comic series *The Adventures of Tintin*. The character is remembered as “very tall with a long neck.”³² In Winneba, animal characters disappeared during Ghana’s depression of the 1980s. They were revived by Red Cross No. 4 in 1992 under the banner “The Great Animal Kingdom” (see Fig. 4). Contemporary versions do not resemble Kwo-Tintin. Heavy, dyed fiber or layers of cloth strips are sewn onto a cloth suit made from recycled wheat flour sacks. These characters may be further identified by spectators as ancestors, Devils, Satan, or Vampire.³³ Their antics bring cheers from spectators, yet these same people keep at a safe distance. Such characters celebrate local heritage and demonstrate continuity within Fancy Dress while expressing innovation.

MUSIC AND CHOREOGRAPHY

Fancy Dress events utilize songs and movements for empowerment. Trombones and trumpets rise above the sound of a busy day in town, blasting a festive melody backed by bass and snare drums keeping the beat. As the music draws closer, performers wearing colorful costumes and masks dance joyfully down the

street. Sometimes the participants are few, and other times rows and rows of masqueraders in shiny fabrics and garlands appear. People emerge from their homes and businesses onto the street. Everyone is smiling and perhaps singing; they are happy to see the parade. Spectators dance, clap, and intermingle with performers. The accumulation of sights and sounds tingle the senses and heighten the excitement that overturns the everyday into one that unifies and brings communal harmony.

Brass bands, hired by every group that can afford them, play *adaha*, highlife, hiplife, blues, gospel, and Christmas songs today. *Adaha* brass bands appeared in coastal Ghana as early as the 1880s (Collins 2017: 14), invented by Fante musicians after hearing West Indian musicians use European brass instruments for music that had five pulses in 4/4 time. The British had given brass instruments to the Fante school children and taught them European 4/4 rhythms, unfamiliar to locals and unpopular. However, the Black Atlantic overlay of five pulses over 4/4 rhythm was a polyrhythm understood by the Fante, who transformed it into the local version known today as *adaha*.³⁴ Fancy Dressers often dance the *atwim*, a quick dance step, to *adaha* music.

Winneba masqueraders take an active part in choosing both the songs and dances their group performs. In the 2012 Masquefest competition, Tumus No. 3 members danced to the popular highlife song “Waist & Power: African Man” by 4x4. An excerpt of the lyrics demonstrates why Tumus members selected this song.

*Yes, I get super natural power, power
Power o! power, power
Power African black power
Power, power waste and power
Power speedometer along hour*



*Power papa bi, I don't need lawyer
Heat condition hotter than fire* (4x4 2017)

The song was danced using new choreography known as Azonto. Winneba Fancy Dressers brag that they invented Azonto in 2010 when members from each of the groups went to Tamale for a national dance competition, spurring the internationally popular dance craze.³⁵ The movements of Azonto concentrate on the lower body with bent knees that position the body

15 Cowgirls are recognized for their skirt or short pantaloons, vest, and hat. Egyaa No. 2, Masquefest 2014, Winneba, Ghana.

16 Young men wore the Wedding Girl costume to make a commentary on the socially undesirable behavior of young women having babies outside of wedlock. Tumus No. 3, Masquefest 2017, Winneba, Ghana.

17 Papier-mâché body masks of Jesus and an Angel demonstrate the influence of Charismatic Christianity on southern Ghana in recent years. Holy Cities Academy Masquerade Society, Easter, April 7, 2012, Cape Coast, Ghana.



closer to the earth and the ancestors in what Thompson called the “get-down quality” (1974: 13). Therefore, Fancy Dressers are channeling the power of the ancestors to empower themselves and the community, linking the past with the contemporary moment.³⁶





18 A Red Indian costume worn by Samuel Amaning and his troupe for Masquefest 2001. Winneba, Ghana.
Photo: courtesy of Samuel Amaning, 2009

19 A studio portrait of Ezekiel Fortunato Nelson dressed as King of City for the Ghana City Masquerader Union in 1976 in Accra, Ghana.
Photo: Courtesy of Emmanuel Nathaniel Awudu Nelson, 2012



DIALOGIC HYBRIDITY—A WAY TO UNDERSTAND HEALING THROUGH PERFORMANCE

Rather than simply mimicking British Fancy Dress, the Ghanaian form combines multiple types of cultural performances organically and intentionally to create “an open-ended site of contestation wherein various cultural practices from different classes and ethnic groups are temporarily combined” (Craven 1991: 45). Ghanaian performers in a variety of characters in costumes influenced by sources from across the globe dance in sync with a focus on the lower body, invigorating the ground all stand upon and are buried underneath. This postcolonial play of modernity with a fierceness seen in active footwork serves a meaningful function to establish local authority and belongingness to the site, one that once was overtaken by foreign colonizers.

As I have argued elsewhere, concepts of hybridity that have shaped the discourse of cultural theorists can be applied to Fancy Dress. Fancy Dressers map their performances purposely using both organic and intentional hybridity as a form of double articulation. Characters, foreign and local, merge ideas to create dialogic hybrids. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, in “organic hybridity the mixture merges ... intentional hybridity sets different points of view against each other in a conflictual structure, which retains ‘... a certain elemental, organic energy and openendedness’” (Bakhtin 1981: 361; Young 1995: 21–22). This energy is seen in the dancing, especially in *atwim*. Homi K. Bhabha, building upon Bakhtin, uses his concept to understand hybridity in the context of colonial and postcolonial encounters. Bhabha explains that “colonial mimicry ... is constructed around an ambivalence ... the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (1994: 122). Thus, a Cowboy or other “Other” like the Red Indian is appropriated as characters that are at once

foreign *and* local-ized through costume and mask artistry and choreography (Figs. 11, 18). Applying Bakhtin’s doubled form of hybridity offers a significant dialectical model for understanding how carnival performance is a contestatory activity, one that positions cultural differences against each other dialogically to promote social cohesion.

THE AFRO-BRAZILIAN CONTRIBUTION—A CASE STUDY IN DIALOGIC HYBRIDITY

Dialogic hybridity is exemplified in Fancy Dress performance by the Accra-based group named Ghana City Masquerader Union (Union). This group shares characteristics with other Ghanaian Fancy Dressers, yet also links to Afro-Bahian performances in the Republic of Benin and in Salvador, Brazil. Their characters, music, and choreography demonstrate the way performers can celebrate *and* resist simultaneously in a public arena.

Union is organized around the Nelson family, with a family head designated as the King, who also leads the Fancy Dress group. The title of King is a significant difference between Union and other Fancy Dress groups, who are led by a president. Nelson family members describe themselves as Tabom,³⁷ descendants of Afro-Brazilians who migrated to Accra in the 1830s (Essien 2016: xxi, 7, 11, 31–32). In Brazil, once a Portuguese colony, Black King celebrations began in the eighteenth century, and by the nineteenth century the kings became known as “kings of Kongo,” relating to the Kongo Kingdom in Central Africa, where a number of the enslaved had originated (de Mello e Souza 2015: 39). Catholic brotherhoods in Brazil gave enslaved Africans the opportunity to build new identities and create new rituals, including feasts, coronations, and processions, called *congadas*. Brazilian *congadas* acknowledged a connection with the Christian Kongo Kingdom, which historically maintained its autonomy from the Portuguese (Fromont 2019: 117, 120).



Appearance of the Tabom King on the streets of Accra, once the site of the British colonial administration for the Gold Coast Colony, demonstrates a retaking of power from these former foreign rulers. The current king of Union, Ezekiel Fortunato Nelson, was dressed in 1976 as “King of City” in a costume of silk and eyelet (Fig. 19). His crown was fashioned from cardboard and covered in silk. He held a cord with a ball at the end. The role of king links Union participants and spectators to their Tabom heritage and to Brazil.³⁸ Both Fancy Dress leadership titles, king and president, allude to power in the face of an imposed European national political authority.

Union dance moves include performing in a circular fashion around the musicians in some of the courtyards. Circular choreography is reminiscent of the Bron masquerade in Odumase witnessed by Freeman in 1889. While this type of dance is rarely performed today by other Fancy Dress groups, characters like the Fancy *ɔkomfo* or Red Indians have performed in circular fashion. It is tantalizing to think they may have served protective, anti-witchcraft communal functions.

Circular choreography around town links Union to Brazilian carnival

20 Accompanying the Commanche masqueraders is their Batuque, a group of drums, played with percussive and performative strength during Bahian Carnival March 4, 2019 in the Pelourinho neighborhood of Salvador, Brazil.

21 Fancy Dressers of the Accra-based group, the Ghana City Masquerader Union, dance through the streets of the former British neighborhood Jamestown on Christmas Day in 2013.



performance. Today, groups in Salvador’s Bahian Carnival encircle the historic district of Pelourinho (Fig. 20). The neighborhood is situated in the city’s historic center where enslaved Africans were once publicly displayed, traded, and tortured. After the European elites moved out of Pelourinho, the Blacks moved into their decaying homes and took over the neighborhood. Fancy Dressers also encircle parts of older sections of town. Union, in particular, activates the streets of an older section of Accra in the suburb of Jamestown on Christmas Day (Fig. 21). The suburb of Jamestown, once the headquarters of the British colonial administration, is now inhabited by local people of modest income. Visually and performatively retaking the colonial neighborhood, Union vigorously performs the *atwim* dance at intersections. Thus, by encircling sites of the historic slave trade, both the Fancy Dressers and groups in Salvador are remembering and healing from the legacy of trauma associated with the transatlantic slave trade.³⁹ These sites of memory are reconfigured through dance either by circling the historic urban spaces or by Union circling within a compound.

Union stands out for some of the costumes and odd-shaped headdresses. These costumes resemble neither Simple Dress nor the Winneba aesthetic. Ezekiel’s father, Emmanuel Nelson, was a tailor who founded the Union in 1942. He was inspired by magazine photographs of carnival costumes to create a distinctive ensemble he called “Spanish Dressing” (Fig. 22).⁴⁰ The aesthetic of these costumes are a patchwork of high-intensity colors in satin or silk with the addition of some lace or fringe on the edge of the tunic collar and pantaloons. A crescent-shaped headdress suggests the idea of horns.

It is tempting to consider Spanish Dressing as an amalgamation of ideas, or dialogic hybrids—sixteenth century Portuguese conquistador, the Pierrot, and the fierce bush cow. Firstly, the conquistador as a symbol of European power and colonialism in Brazil and Africa is appropriated through costume, character, and performance, and therein power is transferred from the European warrior/hegemony to the Afro-Brazilian/Tabom community. A Union masquerader wearing Spanish Dressing in 1977 resembles a Portuguese conquistador of the sixteenth century (Fig. 23). This may have been inspired by the costume pictured in the magazine article.⁴¹ It is tantalizing to think that this may have been an Afro-Brazilian/Tabom choice allowing someone local to



(counterclockwise from top)
22 Spanish Dressing is a contemporary costume worn by some Ghana City Masquerader Union performers that may link to Afro-Bahian carnival types. December 25, 2013, Accra, Ghana.



23 Abeka Baxton was described in 2012 as wearing a costume called "Spanish" in this studio portrait of 1977. "Spanish" refers to Spanish Dressing and possibly as Portuguese conquistador. Ghana City Masquerader Union, Accra, Ghana.
 Photo: Courtesy of Emmanuel Nathaniel Awudu Nelson, 2012

24 The group Cara Vanna da Arte parading in shiny, intensely colored, fabric costumes around Pelourinho during Bahian Carnaval on March 4, 2019 in Salvador, Brazil.

appropriate the power of the historical colonial oppressor during performance. Contemporary versions look less like a conquistador and more like some Afro-Bahian costumes (Fig. 24).

Secondly, these costumes were perhaps inspired by Portuguese or Venetian Pierrots, which appear in Bahian Carnaval today (Fig. 25). The Pierrot, or Harlequin, is a character developed by the Italian Commedia Dell'arte. While the character is a type of clown in European contexts, in Afro-Brazilian performance the addition of two cones, described by spectators as horns, signifies a bull.

Thirdly, terrifying characters like the bush cow serve as a warning to those who might not venture prepared for the dangers encountered in colonial, European, and American worlds. Again, foreign influences are interpreted via local performance troupes. Bulls are also part of Buriyan carnival, performed by Afro-Brazilian descendants in Benin, and perhaps were motivated by Brazil's *bumba-meu-boi* dance.⁴² The fierce character from the wild, untamed areas outside the community would warn members to be wary when leaving the boundaries of the town, including foreign territories abroad. Thus, one costume can communicate layered meanings that dialogically contest conflicting cultures.

SIGNIFICANCE

Fancy Dressers cultivate their performances and activities to further their interests creatively, negotiate identity, and display global citizenship. African modernity, like Fancy Dress, is a dance that negotiates the predicament, or a history of foreign cultural contact and oppression, as a force for social change (Imafidon 2020: 173). Michel Foucault's "technologies of the self" is a useful concept for understanding Fancy Dressers because it allows "individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (1988: 18). When a Fancy Dresser inhabits their character and dances in a public space, they are transforming the self, community and nation.

Similar to other Black Atlantic carnivals, identity politics is at the heart of Fancy Dress as a reaction to a history of European and





25 An Afro-Bahian character dressed in a shiny, intensely colored, fabric costume and described as a horned bull may have ties to European Pierrots and contemporary Union Spanish Dressing.
Bahian Carnaval 2019, Salvador, Brazil.

American colonization and continued economic exploitation. Black Atlantic carnivals offer a transformational experience that psychologically returns participants and spectators to the homeland, whether that be on the African continent or in the diaspora. As Janet Catherine Berlo observed with indigenous cultures elsewhere, their feet were “in two worlds that is at the heart of the

colonial encounter” and by “fracturing ... the colonialist text by rearticulating it in broken English,” ... changes and appropriates both the medium and the message” (Berlo 1990: 139–40, quoting Parry 1987: 42). Several Fancy Dress practitioners expressed to me their interest and dreams of going to Europe or the United States. “Ghana and USA are compatible.”²³ Group names, characters, and costume motifs communicate the same sense of double consciousness, wherein performers identify themselves in both local terms and in connection to Europe or the United States.

Characters, costumes, and choreography align Fancy Dress performances with other Black Atlantic carnivals; these commonalities function to heal communities from cultural and political trauma caused by a history of subjugation. What outwardly appears as “play” in Fancy Dress is a cloak to hide expressions of tension during the colonial period when outright resistance to militarily superior Europeans would not have been advisable. In the postcolonial era, the trauma continues with pressures from the global economy and local authority figures maintaining the heritage of economic oppression. Fancy Dress is a form of play that gives disempowered classes “power” by publicly expressing commentary on pop culture; social and cultural mores; and local, national and international politics.

Notes

In addition to my gratitude to all the fabulous Fancy Dressers, I heartily appreciate the mentorship of Doran H. Ross and Robin Poyner. Without their encouragement, support, and advice this article and my related book would not have been possible.

1 See page 8 of this issue regarding the use of terms, none of which ideal, used to describe this carnival area surrounding or connected to the Atlantic.

2 Kakaamotobe is the term used across Ghana for performances intended to frighten (usually children). Kakaamotobe comes from the corrupted Ga expression, “Kaá ké moko bí ewo mo he gbéye shí emóó mō,” meaning “Don’t tell anyone, it frightens but it doesn’t catch you” (James Essegbey, personal communication, Aug. 10, 2020). Kakabotini, Kakabotofo, Katabotofo, and Kokoorebabaa are also terms for the spectacle. Performers from all regions dance Kakaamotobe, but their costumes and performance style are unlike those of Fancy Dress in the southern regions.

3 Micots 2021 delves into these influences more thoroughly.

4 Fancy Dress in Britain consists of dressing up as a famous person or members of royalty and noble classes. The history of this practice extends back to the Tudor court of the sixteenth century (Butchart n.d.).

5 The Gold Coast Colony, known as Ghana today, was a British colony from 1874 to 1957.

6 *Sakramodu* and *sakrabodu* are sometimes used interchangeably without referring to singular or plural on the coast.

7 Bedwetters were a common target.

8 Uncle Ekow Ackon, interview by author, June 24, 2017.

9 The term “witch” was applied by Europeans to those Akan individuals whose spirit can leave their physical body, a.k.a. astral projection. Most Akan people believe that these so-called witches usually combat the forces of evil to help people, while Europeans believe witches take pleasure in hurting and killing people. Obonsam, a local deity, was understood among the Akan as a dispenser of evil; however, Gabriel Bannerman-Richter has observed that these opposite ideas of witch and Obonsam are now combined.

Thus, a witch in Akan understanding is a person who has all the powers to dispense evil, yet may refrain from using them in order to protect people (Bannerman-Richter 1982: 12–15). Therefore, “witch-hunting” may refer to finding specific individuals who were using their powers for evil and expel them from the community.

10 Gyaman, or Jaman, is a Bron state in the Cercle de Bondoukou, which crosses into Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire.

11 The interview was conducted by A.A. Baidoo and T.E. Fell in Sunyani, May 1907.

12 These may or may not have been restricted to *asafo* performances. Unfortunately, the person most knowledgeable about these performances died before Forni or Ross could investigate further (Forni and Ross 2017: 243–46. See Fig. 5.58, p. 242, for the bush-cow masqueraders; Fig. 5.63, p. 246, for the bush-cow or deer masquerade ensembles; and Fig. 5.62, p. 245, for the painted bush-cow mask and cloth costume). Awo Sarpong and De-Valera N.Y.M. Botchway documented a similar performer in Oguua Fetu Afahye in Cape Coast from 2015. Described as a “Buffalo Mask of the Kona-Ebiradze Clan” in the figure caption, no further information is provided on how this masquerade fits into their chapter topic of Fancy Dress (Sarpong and Botchway 2017: 181, Fig. 11.2). A *sakrobundi* mask, carved by Nafana sculptors, similar to the one described by Freeman, came from Gyaman and is part of the British Museum collection. People in the Cercle de Bondoukou belong to the Gur linguistic family. The Gur culture, which includes the southern Senufo who have strong masking practices, is situated north of the Akan-related Baule in Côte d’Ivoire. This mask shares similar characteristics with those in Cape Coast documented by Ross. Both have the same facial shape; horns protruding from the mouth; circular shiny, mirrorlike eyes; protruding tongue; and the shape and painted segmentation of the back-swept horns (Bravmann 1979: 46, Fig. 2).

13 Ackon was a spry man of 94 when I met him in Takoradi in 2017.

14 Uncle Ekow Ackon, interview by author, June 24, 2017. Also, the etymology of “*sakrabodu*” may be either a corruption of *Sakrobundi* or the Akan

statement “*sakra-abo-ndua*” meaning stones scattering sticks. See Micah 2014: 80, 167. Could the latter relate to the dispersal of evil spirits?

15 Also see a partial Fancy *ɔkomfo* behind the foreground dancer in Fig. 1.

16 Kow Atta, interview by author, June 27, 2017.

17 Circling may provide a ring of spiritual protection for the group, but Kow Atta and other stilt walkers did not express this purpose to me.

18 Tumus is either an abbreviated form of “Two Moves” or from *atumba rosa*, or “*tun bo resu*” meaning the stone of the blacksmith is crying or chiming and recalls a call and response musical pattern like a hammer on an anvil.

19 The four-block Carnival as Festival parade ends at the Annor Adjei/Justimoh intersection, where popular Ghanaian musicians and singers play on stage.

20 In the early 1960s, this became a military, rather than cultural, parade.

21 Simple Dress was invented in the 1960s by Saltpond tailor John Kwaa Coker (1901–1991). Simple Dress costumes consist of a long-sleeve shirt and drawstring trousers, paired with any type of mask and headdress to create various characters. Constructed from inexpensive, imported cotton cloth, Simple Dress costumes were an instant success among participants.

22 For example, imported logos on the backs of Winneba costumes refer to ideas of wealth, power, and strength often from foreign sources, perhaps attracting these qualities to enhance their performance and life (Micots 2014: 39, Fig. 14).

23 Chris Roy once asked me if any Stars Wars characters appeared, and the answer is yes and no. Masks of Jar Jar Binks and others appear, but spectators didn’t identify them as such. None of my local friends seemed aware of the series, even in 2017.

24 For more information on the Red Indian in *asafo* and Fancy Dress, see Micots 2012.

25 Red Indian characters in Fancy Dress no longer perform in circular fashion, and they do not appear in *asafo* performances today. When Cowboys and Red Indians appear in Fancy Dress now, they are reminders of Fancy Dress heritage. As a result, their duties have changed, with Cowboys often acting as

leaders within the group, once the responsibility of Red Indians.

26 Jacob Annobil, interview by author, June 16, 2017.

27 Cross-dressing and lewd behavior by males dressed as females is a common parody in Ghanaian Fancy Dress and harvest festival parades.

28 One of the few female Fancy Dress tailors, Augustina Mensah has been sewing costumes since 1989. She learned her skills from her late husband Ebenezer Kow Ghunney, who was the former vice-chairman for the Tumus No. 3 group. Their son Solomon Ghunney started designing costumes at a young age and contributed to the design. Mensah works as a seamstress full time today. When she began making costumes, she was the only female making them. Today a few women make costumes, but not regularly or in great numbers. "They don't like sewing it. It takes a lot of time." Mensah likes making costumes and says she makes more money sewing them. Augustina Mensah, interview by author, June 28, 2017.

29 Richard Bentum, interview by author, June 16, 2017.

30 Local deities and characters like Mami Wata have appeared as fierce characters in Fancy Dress. Mami Wata in Ghana is believed to be a seductress capable of bringing about man's destruction through promises of sex and money. Her image was influenced by chromolithographic prints imported from India that spread throughout southern Ghana in the 1970s. In one example, a *papier-mâché* mask of Mami Wata was made by Nana Yaa Arkoful sometime in the late-twentieth century for a Sekondi group who paired it with a Simple Dress costume. Find images of *abosam*, local deities, in Micots (2021 supplement <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781793643094/Kakaamotobe-Fancy-Dress-Carnival-in-Ghana>: O4.4–O4.5), and Mami Wata in Micots (2021: 127, Fig. 4.6) respectively.

31 Kwesi Kaya Thomas Hemans, interview by author, May 1, 2012.

32 Fataawu Bellow, interview by author, June 14, 2017.

33 See two Devils in Micots 2014: 35.

34 John Collins, interview by author, August 5, 2017.

35 Several leaders told me that the dance they invented for the competition became known as Azonto. Who originated the dance craze, which spread throughout Ghana and internationally, is debated. Azonto, considered by some to be a "Dance of Defiance," is naturally something the masqueraders would wish to embrace, whether they invented it or not (Brefo 2013).

36 My colleagues in Fancy Dress talk about "feeling the power" when they dance "strong," but they do not verbalize it as a "get-down quality" or connect this sense of strength as coming from ancestors.

37 Or Tabon.

38 None of my Tabom colleagues in Ghana shared memories linked to the Kongo Kingdom.

39 Cultural trauma and its legacy in the visual arts have been discussed by Berlo 1990, Craven 1991, Lewis 2001.

40 Ezekiel Fortunato Nelson, interview by author, February 25, 2012.

41 Ezekiel could not remember which magazine inspired his father, but he knew only that it was written in a foreign language, Spanish or Portuguese, the colonial language spoken in Brazil. Ezekiel Fortunato Nelson, interview by author, February 25, 2012.

42 Artists in West Africa may have been aware of the character described by Brazilian visitors to the coast or via *O Cruzeiro* magazine, which published Verger's images of Father Christmas, the Bull, and a Bird masquerader in the August 11, 1951, issue in an article titled, "Grande Soirée Brésilienne de Bourihan." Afro-Brazilian magazines published stories and pictures about local festivals and carnivals. *O Cruzeiro* was a weekly magazine published between 1928 and 1985. Digital archives, Pierre Verger Foundation, Salvador, Brazil. Find images online at <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781793643094/Kakaamotobe-Fancy-Dress-Carnival-in-Ghana> under the Features tab (Figs. O7.19–O7.20). More images and short videos of Fancy Dressers are found on this site of supplemental visual material for my book. (Micots 2021).

43 Ebenezer Bortsie, interview by author, December 23, 2011.

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