

MASQUERADE SOCIETIES IN GHANA

"I heard the drums coming down the street and then the fifes and the pipes and they came around the corner, all dancing." ¹

It is likely that the idea of masquerading in Ghana was borrowed from European traders resident on the 'coast' in the 18th and 19th Centuries. Fever, isolation, heat and gold made them tend to drink rather often and to revel at the least excuse. Their Christmas parties for example made such a deep impression on the natives that that feast was consequently named "Buronya". In Fante the word means 'The white man has it good' (literally 'The white man has got'). Today that term is used not only by the Fantes but all Akans as well as some non-Akan tribes.

At some of these "White-man's" parties, masks were worn. As mask wearing was unknown to the natives the effect was tremendous.

An old Fante informant of Kumasi gave me a different account of the origin of masquerading in this country. He says it was brought to Ghana by 'Saa Loofo' (Sierra Leonians). Sierra Leone in the middle of the 19th Century was made up of only a few tiny settlements of emancipated slaves and neighbouring "hostile" natives. But there is evidence that from 1822 Sir Charles M'Carthy as Governor of the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone, brought over companies of West Indian troops then stationed in Sierra Leone into this country to help check Ashanti invasions of the South. This arrangement continued till the sack of Kumasi in 1874 by Sir Garnet Wolseley.²

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1. Ernest Hemingway: "The Snows of Kilimanjaro and other stories". Penguin, p.119
 2. Walton Claridge: A history of the Gold Coast and Ashanti.

As people from the Carribean, it is likely that these soldiers had some idea of carnivals. Indeed it is possible that they held carnivals of some sort while here. There was the regimental band to provide the music. They could make all the costumes they needed from material bought from the forts. Gin was cheap and plentiful.

Everything points in the direction of the West Indian troops as the likeliest, referred to as the "Saa Loofo". In any case the fact remains that masquerading as it is today was not known or practised in this country at least in Southern Ghana in pre-colonial times.

It must be said though that for many tribes in our neighbouring countries of the Ivory Coast and Niger, masks and masquerading formed an important aspect of their culture.

Most Ghanaian cities, towns and even some villages, have masquerade societies, particularly places with large colonies of Fantes. Kumasi has three such societies - Red Cross, Prince of Wales and Cosmos. Smaller groups appear from time to time but are short lived. Winneba and Saltpond are said to have some very active societies. Their members include some prominent persons besides the usual Young men and boys.

Masquerade Societies in Ghana are exclusively men's Societies. It is their custom to hold turn-outs at the principal feasts of the Christian year - Christmas and Easter. Although I have known the Kumasi based societies to hold up to five turn-outs besides the Christmas and Easter outings.

The turn-out is a procession through the streets of a city, town or village by members masquerade societies. They wear dresses which correspond with their masks. A band, often a loud brass orchestra brings up the rear. Sometimes the music is provided by a band of fifes and drums. Some are content with just percussion. One popular tune of the masqueraders is "Abamo" which runs thus:

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The masqueraders dance energetically with varied and rhythmic movement to the music of the bands. Many spectators especially children can't help joining in the dance: As the masqueraders dance, the procession moves slowly on through the streets. They stop at houses and sometimes enter compounds. They continue their performance in these compounds and are given presents almost always in cash. One member collects the money in a sealed wooden box which has a slot at the top through which coins and paper money are dropped.

MASKS (Character)

For outings, members dress up as one of the following three kinds of characters:-

- (1) imitation or caricature of particular people
- (2) animals
- or (3) nondescript human faces.

An example of caricature was the double-life-size likeness of Neville Chamberlain (the pre-war Prime Minister of Britain) towering head and shoulders over the procession with a top hat and a high collar. (fig. 1). An example of the animal masks which I once saw was a huge cockerell (fig. 2) as big as a small car, who used to career up and down the procession. He would sway dangerously as he went, seemingly falling over. There was also a frightful gorilla. His mask was the type which covers the entire head of the wearer. To match the mask, he wore coarse woollen overalls complete with stuffed tail. The effect was fantastic - I later discovered that real gorillas did not have tails at all! That tail, however, added something to the appearance of the evil-looking bogey (fig. 3). The nondescript and expressionless human-face masks form a majority of masks at the turn-out. The faces are usually painted pink. Pale faces therefore dominate the procession.

There are occasional attempts by members to be creative. A horse-less cowboy, a Roman Soldier in armour-plate of painted cardboard or a fetish priest. A comical figure was that of the conservancy boy with his bucket atop his head and his short broom in his hand (fig.4).

High above the whole turn-out often, is the stilt-walker 'Sakrabudu'. He walks or rather dances on stilts 12 feet to 24 feet high. His mask is always a plain pale-face one. (fig.5)

MASKS(Technical)

Masquerade Societies use two types of masks, the cast (papier mache) type and the wire net type.

The Cast Type: Usually imported, it is cast from a mould using pulp paper and then painted in the appropriate colours. Some are made to cover the head completely and others just the face. In some cases it covers nearly the whole body as for example the cockerel which covers up to the wearer's knees.

I was told in Kumasi that a young man of Obuasi locally produced some good cast masks in the forties. Although he took the trouble to tour places where he was likely to get customers, patronage was not encouraging. He soon went out of business.

The Wire-Netting Type

They are made from the $\frac{1}{2}$ " - $\frac{1}{10}$ " mesh used domestically to prevent insects from entering houses. Cut to size, the netting is then pressed and moulded with the fingers into shape: eyes, nose, mouth, cheeks, chin and forehead. The mask is then edged with cloth or a piece of soft metal sheeting. It is given as usual a coat of pink paint all over. The eyes are picked out in white for the balls and black

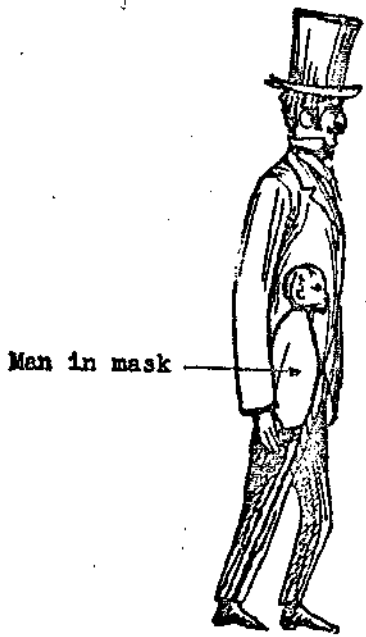


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Kedjanyi

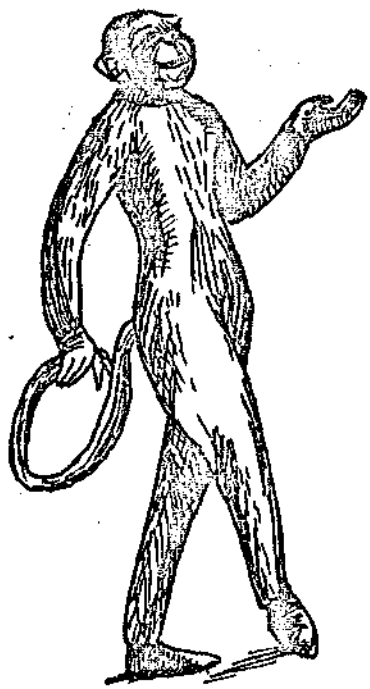


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

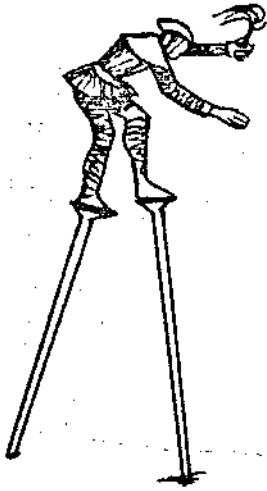


Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

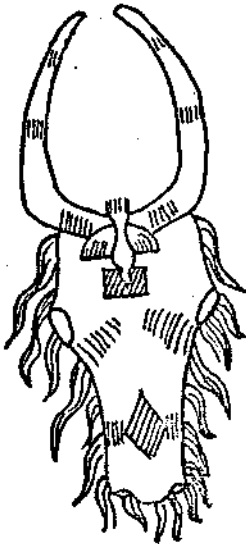


Fig. 8

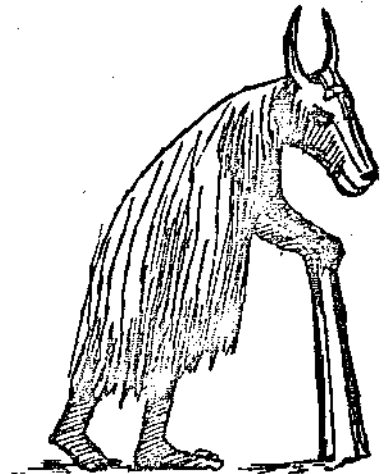


Fig. 9

(after E.L.R. Meyerowitz)

Mad Jany!

for the pupils. Black lines define the eye-lids and red is used for the lips. Moustaches usually the 'Errol Flynn type' is painted on the upper lip. On the whole, the finish gives these masks an appearance of effeminate pale-facedness even where it is meant to portray a male face with moustache or not. (fig.6)

COSTUME

Some masks call for particular types of costume. The gorilla wore an overall of dark brown woollen material, with tail. The cockerel mentioned above, also wore a pair of tightfitting trousers with scale-markings painted on them. His legs sticking out of the huge mask looked like the legs of a giant bird! Most masqueraders wear gay fancy-print cotton shirts and trousers. The shirts have frills of calico along the sleeves, around the chest and back, and along the collars. Some of these collars are really capes. The trousers too have frills along the legs. The complete suit except for texture and prints has the appearance of Red Indian costume without headgear. (fig.7)

ACCESSORIES

Most masqueraders carry horse tail whisks (Bodua) in addition to a stick or cane for the purpose of keeping children outside the procession. Each member wears a badge. Some have feathers stuck in their headgear and wear castanets which they 'clink' in time with the music

LOCAL INFLUENCES

Naturally from the days of the "revelling Coasters" and the Carribean troops, masquerading has acquired a considerable amount of local characteristics. This is evident in the variety of characters portrayed: fetish priest, conservancy boy, and market mammy (impersonated by a man). These men are often so muscular and stiff that

they rouse a feeling of revulsion rather than of admiration). Another local addition is the Sakrabudu (stilt-walker). The term Sakrabudu now associated with stilt-walking was originally the name of a god. Austen Freeman relates his experience of a dance performed for this god in 1898, at Odumasi (Sunyani Dumasi?), "enveloped from head to foot in a covering of... soft fibre and... a huge wooden mask in the semblance of an antelope's head surmounted by a pair of curved horns. The mask was painted red and white...." (fig. 8)

The priest referred to, held two long sticks while dancing. These represented the fore-legs of the antelope whose mask he wore. (see fig. 9). Possibly these sticks came to be associated with the stilts of the stilt-walkers and the name of the god or his dance became associated with stilt-walking.

The dance of the procession too is of course the highlife, the dance 'par excellence' of Ghana. The opening music is usually a march, then the catchy tunes I have referred to. At nightfall the turn-out closes again with the same march, which is the signature tune of the society. The only other type of dance besides the high-life is the Atwem, a fast Asafo dance which is performed occasionally to relieve the monotony.

Now-a-days, masquerading in Ghana seems to be on the wane. This is partly due to the presence of more amenities for recreation during holidays. Travel too has become easy, therefore more people work outside their home-towns. There is so much movement at holiday times that it is difficult to organise turn-outs.

1. "A fetish dance". R.A. Freeman in 'Travels and life in Ashanti and Jaman, 1898', from Pageant of Ghana by Freda Wolfson, p.195.

However, in some towns despite these difficulties societies are still very active. Winneba is one of such towns. The enthusiasm of the people of Winneba for masquerading is such that the various societies hold competitions at turn-outs. Awards are made to the society which presents the best turn-out.

I believe that T.V., Radio and the press of Ghana can do something to put a new life into Masquerading today. They can give effective publicity of the activities of these societies in order to make people more aware of one of our sources of entertainment which is now faced with possible extinction.

J. Kedjanyi.