



MISFIT CHILDREN

An Inquiry into Childhood Belongings

EDITED BY **MARKUS P.J. BOHLMANN**

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Chapter 11

Freaks in Procession? The *Fancy Dress* Masquerade as Haven for Negotiating Eccentricity during Childhood. A Study of Child Masqueraders in Cape Coast, Ghana

Awo Sarpong and De-Valera Botchway

As the music of the brass band hits another crescendo, a throng of children clad in frilly harlequin-like costumes flood the Cape Coast Kingsway Road, flowing in from the adjoining *Ntsin* market street. They dart this way and that way, stamping their feet, hollering at each other and blowing on whistles with reckless abandon. The earth yields under mercilessly trampling sneakered and *charley wote*¹-clad feet; dust clouds rise up into the air. Sweat mingles with dirt as their bodies move at a canter and twist to the sounds of loud parade music; a few waists gyrate rhythmically in movement reminiscent of coital dance; canes and fly whisks whip in the air, to the left, to the right. On this beautiful morning of New Year's Day, zany child masqueraders make yet another annual outing in the company of adult maskers, drawing a mixture of awe, fear, and joy from street side spectators with their humorous and grotesque masks, choreographed acrobatic displays, and outlandish dance moves.

As they throng through a street lined side-by-side with spectators young and old, the brass band heats up its tune, and the march turns into *ntwiim*.² Maskers and crowd join together in a frenzy of freestyle dancing. A few masked youth sashay toward non-participating onlookers to collect gifts in the form of money: Ghana Cedi coins and notes. Spectators fumble for their pockets and purses, quickly dropping all found small change into the proffered moneyboxes for fear that these capricious colorful *imps* may cane-whip them raw if they refuse money offerings on such a jubilant occasion.

We stand close to the fruit market mammies, live camera in hand, recording the fanfare. The careening tricks of a *Sakrabudu*³ draws exclamations of awe.



Figure 11.1 "Masquerade Procession" in Cape Coast Town. ©2015. Photograph by Awo Sarpong.

Our camera fixes on him, capturing every movement. A lone child masker dances close to the tall stilts, drawing attention. This is not the typical child masker's behavior. There are a number of important rules every child masker lives by. This child has broken two: "Never fancy without an adult guardian watching over you"⁴ and "Stay away from the stilts of the Sakrabudu!"⁵ Our deviant is a skinny youth not more than eight years old, clad in a classical rag-tag costume and a wire-mesh mask depicting a plump, rosy-cheeked, moustached English man. His gaze scans the crowd, perhaps in his thirst, as he searches for an *Nsu*⁶ seller. We watch as he turns and saunters toward the fruit stand where we perch with our camera, surrounded by seated chatty market women. Suddenly, and without permission, he hops onto the lap of a woman old enough to be his grandmother and performs a raunchy lap dance that lasts all but a few seconds. Quick as a flash, he bolts for the secure company of his comrades, before the shocked old woman can recover herself and wallop his bottoms. The on-looking crowd bursts into uncontrollable laughter as they take in the spectacle. The market mammies tease the old lady: "You found yourself a spirited new admirer, Adedzewa!" Half laughing, half cursing, Adedzewa screams at the boy, "Caricature! Waist like a wasp!" Bottoms proffer and shake in her direction—his cheeky response. We watch as his short legs carry him quickly from the scene of his New Year comedic display amidst more laughter and cheers from the crowd of spectators. Later in the day, as we sit with drinks with the leader of Justice Fancy Club,⁷ reflecting on these children's performances with veteran maskers. The boy's curious antics come up for discussion. The leader links the parade to "freak," a connection he uses to explain the boy's actions at the pineapple stand: "We [Fancy Dress performers] satirize . . . deviance, so naturally freak is a theme of every parade these children perform. . . . Every child dancer is expected to perform his full cup of eccentricities to make the day a success. The boy was simply channelling freak, which is the true spirit of 'Fancy.'"⁸ The conversation moves on from "freak" as a synonymy of Fancy Dress to the freedom available to child maskers. Are there sanctions against child behavior and conduct that clearly contradict socially prescribed and approved deportments of the child, as in the example of the boy at the stand? Is such a child liable for punishment for his actions, or does the eccentric nature of the parade protect him from "real world" sanctions? Are there stipulated limits to the strange actions by children in the parade as far as the eccentric demands of Fancy Dress go? Nana Kwamena Twi, Safohene (Captain) and current *Sakrabudu* for Sanatos Fancy Club, explains:

The Fancy child operates in a world where the censoring eye of the adult, which sifts his performances for actions deemed unfit, is absent; he dances unbridled. . . . No one can touch him; no punishment awaits him. . . . As to limits on strange

behavior, Fancy is the ultimate rogue ball. The more off-beat the better. No adult-sanctioned rules exist that prohibit eccentric performances once the parade is in full swing. The universe has its own rules, but these exist only to protect the child from self-harm, and to secure the mystery on which Fancy thrives, so for instance he cannot strip in public. The only misfits in the Fancy dress universe would be the children that fear their own eccentricity. And that type of child masker has yet to be born.⁹

The night wears on. Our conversation deepens. The veterans reminisce their experiences as child maskers of the yesteryears. We listen intently, fascinated by narratives of a play world where socio-cultural definitions and ethnic standards of what is fit and unfit with relation to the Cape Coast child are suspended. It is a world where the “eccentric refusal of social roles”¹⁰ has currency, and the “latent aspects of humanity”¹¹ and all things forbidden in the eyes of society emerge; here, children play “freak” in the clear view of adults while being simultaneously and paradoxically out of their reach, untouchable and unpunishable. We begin to reimagine Fancy Dress as possibly satisfying a little explored yet vital need in masking children of Cape Coast: the provision of a safe and secure space for the exploration of their eccentric aspects, “the freaky child.” The characteristic of Fancy Dress parades as space for uncensored play provides the child performers with protection from adult intrusions on their free movements as well as the manifestations of idiosyncrasies and eccentricities that are common in self-creation and creative self-expression. Could the participation of these children be for a reason as simple as negotiating for themselves an immunity from the adult label *misfit* as those who do not fit, easily stamped on thoughts, imaginations, and actions that depart from preferred qualities associated with the notions of “child,” that is, innocence, virtue, delicateness, and quietness? Could children be using parades of the gross, the loud, and the grotesque as a safe space to explore qualities largely considered undesirable and monstrous in children such as quirkiness, kinkiness, and coarseness?¹² Could it be that Cape Coast children perform in the masking parades to achieve temporal relief from the pressures of adult-imposed deportments that attest to a successful moral training of a child while stifling these children’s curious explorations of selfhood? Our musings lead us to the work outlined in this chapter.

This chapter is the outcome of fieldwork (2014–2015) undertaken to explore child maskers’ participation in the Fancy Dress parades in Cape Coast as a protected space where their attraction to and fascination with freakiness resort to and secure a safe haven for expression. Fancy Dress parades with their street dance-dramas that feature all things strange and bizarre present children with a living space where, through entertaining dance and drama, they are able to escape the socio-cultural label *misfit* while freely exploring

the freaky child, in the real world a misfit category. A few extant sociological and historical studies exist on Ghana's Fancy Dress culture, but an engagement of the literature reveals that they pay attention to themes that focus on the status and development of Fancy Dress within the territory of Gold Coast and Ghana, the cultural relevance of Fancy Dress events, as well as its place within the context of Ghanaian popular culture. However, one thing that this present work adds to these studies on Fancy Dress in Ghanaian society is an attempt to read a peculiar inner logic of this culture among child performers in Cape Coast.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF FANCY DRESS IN CAPE COAST

The name *Cape Coast* is a corrupted derivation from the Portuguese name *Cabo Corso*, which means "Short Cape," but its indigenous name in the Fante language of the region is *Oguaa*. Settlement started as a Fetu fishing yillage before the European intrusion into the Gold Coast (now Ghana) in the fifteenth century. The commerce of the town was part of a local trade network, which connected the coastal and forest zones of the Gold Coast and the savannah zones of West Africa and North Africa. The thriving indigenous commerce of Cape Coast also converged with the trans-Atlantic trade, which had further inserted the Gold Coast into the global capitalist economy, and Cape Coast blossomed into a prosperous business littoral city. It became the first capital of the Gold Coast when the strong imposition of European (i.e., British) colonial rule happened in the Gold Coast. As an epicenter of commerce and a key spot of Western formal schooling, Cape Coast, fancifully named "Athens of the Gold Coast," attracted a lot of people from all over the country, from parts of Africa and from the world, particularly Europe and the Americas. The town was the home of a mixed population, including Fante and non-Fante Africans, peoples of the Americas and Europe, and the mulatto offspring of African women and European men. Cape Coast thus became demographically cosmopolitan. However, because the Fante ancillary of the larger Akan ethnic group originally established Cape Coast, the area's indigenous African customs strived to balance with the influx of foreign ideas, especially those of Western modernity. So, despite its cosmopolitan nature, which has prevailed well into the twenty-first century, the basic cultural landscape of Cape Coast has managed to maintain its Fante character and cosmology, as well as its socio-cultural attributes derived from the Akan worldview. The historical antecedents that gave Cape Coast's society a cosmopolitan flair before the fifteenth century and that continued to impact this society from the period of European imperial presence onward facilitated the production and development of certain cultural items, ideas, and performances through

the creative syncretization and hybridization of indigenous and exogenous forms and concepts. European ideas and forms were present in many of such products of syncretization. Some of these products, including the Fancy Dress masquerade, are alive today as local knowledge systems of Cape Coast. They are still evolving through further syncretic transformations, especially in the age of globalization in the post-colonial era. The Fancy Dress masquerade, which evolved from both local and foreign inventiveness, is at once a performative and symbolic customary item of dance and music in the cultural landscape of Cape Coast. Formerly a male-only tradition, it is now opened to all ages and sexes, and it provides entertainment and cultural memory through masquerading spectacles and codes. Moreover, however, children engage in its performance as a means of connecting with their "inner" freak and negotiating temporal relief from the pressure of conformed behavior all year round. Hence, the major thrust of this work is to illuminate the Fancy Dress custom and spectacle as a space and license for children to be divergent. So when did Fancy Dress emerge in Cape Coast?

Most African villages, towns and cities have masquerade societies that date back to antiquity, and the use of masks, for myriad purposes, constitutes a vital part of the culture and traditions of Africa.¹³

However, Fancy Dress masquerading, the focus of this chapter, was unknown in Africa in pre-colonial times. It is a more recent spawn of an interaction between Africans of the Gold Coast and Euro-Caribbean masking cultures, and it presents a secular counterpart to the more serious, spiritually-oriented performances of the longstanding traditional masking and secret societies in Africa.¹⁴ Critics Herbert Cole and Doran Ross describe the Fancy Dress performance, also known in Cape Coast as *Kaakaamotobi or tiii tiii*,¹⁵ as an art phenomenon of a multi-cultural origin, "neither wholly European nor wholly African, but inspired from both sources."¹⁶ Granted, there are variations in the chronology of dates and events, as well as in the names of the persons whose creative ingenuity birthed this tradition. Upon encountering the various renditions of the story, one cannot deny that the map of the origins, history, and development of Fancy Dress is a rather complex one to read. One fact, however, remains certain: the Cape Coast Fante of the colonial era took from masking customs and practices that were considered strange, alien, even eccentric, and they reworked them to create a new cultural item, that is, the alternate universe of Fancy Dress. Here, they could go at given times of the year, unrestrained and unbarred, and they could with dance, music, and mask become creatures that defied the "normal" and engaged in the novel and the eccentric.

The emergence of Fancy Dress in Cape Coast is believed to date back to sometime in the nineteenth century. This is a common notion that prevails among Fancy Dressers in Cape Coast.¹⁷ The nineteenth century, therefore,



Figure 11.2 "Buffalo Mask of the Kona-Ebiradze Clan," worn during the indigenous Fetu Afahye harvest festival of the Fante people of Cape Coast. ©2015. Photograph by Awo Sarpong.

must have been a time when the culture had gained a kind of social visibility and currency in Cape Coast, but it is also reasonable to imagine that in the history of its development, shadows and rudiments of this visible cultural phenomenon must have existed in their embryonic state in the eighteenth century. However, Fancy Dress, as we know it today, with its clubs and associations, long street processions, flamboyant costumes and masks, group choreographed and performed street dance and drama, and prize-tagged competitions did not become popular in Cape Coast until the 1930s. Club lore that circulated among the Fancy Dress clubs in Cape Coast tell of a rather impressive display of a league of masked men from Saltpond¹⁸ one fine Christmas Day, which left an indelible mark on the mind of one man, Kwamena Left. Accompanied by a local artist, Opanyin Kojo Adu, Left organized a visit to the maskers in Saltpond to learn the secrets of Fancy Dress. Left went on to found the first two Fancy Dress clubs in Cape Coast, *Ntsin Kuw* and *Tantre Kuw*.¹⁹ Membership was open to men only. The art of mask and costume making, which was brought to an appreciable level of top quality and competitive finesse in his days, was a legacy of Adu. After the formation of the two clubs, however, Fancy Dress lore experienced what we call an uncomfortable "silence" of forty-two years, where virtually nothing of its activities nor of Left himself can be recalled or retold.²⁰ The story resumes in 1973. This is the year when John Kwamena Sekum founds the Anchors Club.²¹ Like Left before him, Sekum decided to form his club after witnessing a performance by the Anchors Club of Sekondi, whose leader, by a fortunate stroke of serendipity, was also surnamed Sekum. In the fashion of his predecessor, John travelled to Sekondi to learn the secrets of the Anchors Club. He named his club Anchors, in honor of the one in Sekondi.

Anchors is the longest standing club in Cape Coast history and the one credited with introducing children to Fancy Dress in Cape Coast. This introduction happened in 1976, during the Christmas parade. All of Cape Coast could not believe their eyes, for on the street twelve masked children danced, with John as their leader and his close to fifty adult dancers frolicking behind them. John had done the unthinkable: he had made Fancy Dress performers out of children. He had "profaned a sacred tradition of performing with men only,"²² and "made rascals out of innocents. . ."²³

The entire community was up in furor, of three different kinds: excited parents busily cheering their "little rascals"; conservatives and traditional-minded elders protesting the parade and directing looks of disgust at the children whom they described as "disorderly . . . dancing in the open, anyhow and doing as they please . . . dancing queerly . . . dancing with adults as though with their peers"²⁴; and the spectating crowd, encouraging the young performers with cheers and gifts of money. John, by this single maverick act, had unknowingly bought freedom for generations of eccentric children, living and

yet to be born, for whom the Fancy Dress parade would come to represent a secure space in which they would defy adult definitions of their child identity and explore a "misfit" attraction and fascination with the eccentric through mask and costume. Further, John's initiative had inserted a child dimension to Fancy Dress, altering the historical narrative of the Cape Coast Fancy Dress culture and adding a new dimension to its function in society: that which had for decades existed as an adult-owned entertainment now provided children the means of exploring the otherwise "forbidden" grotesque. John had birthed in Cape Coast an art form that would help children to feel less "misfit" in their explorations of eccentricity in a childhood that to a great extent had been dictated by adult definitions.

HIJACKED CHILDHOODS, STOLEN AUTONOMIES, AND FORBIDDEN FANTASIES OF CHILDREN

Studies in the field of child and childhood studies show that childhood has not been defined and experienced in the same way by all societies at all times. However, childhood as the construction and the product of adult thinking of what a child needs, how it should be treated, and what is expected of it in terms of behavior seems to apply to all human societies, cultures, and generations.²⁵ Children experience what we choose to call the crisis of two childhoods, that is, the "childhood by the adult" vs. the "childhood by the child." As children become aware of an adult-designed and adult-enforced social reality, they find that the adult view of childhood often contradicts their own. When these two childhoods collide, children are brought to an awareness of the existence of two worlds, which they henceforth must learn to navigate for their own survival. It often comes as a shock to children to discover that some of what is meaningful and enjoyable to them is deemed inappropriate to society at large and that their childhood is not totally about their own experiences, but rather a journey that is characterized by a conformity to an adult childhood that cannot be outmaneuvered but only escaped from through sporadic and episodic rides into worlds that support and promote a childhood of their own definition.

What forces the child to escape in search of solace from the childhood dictated by adults are the rules and regulations of a behavior that guard the "childhood by the adult" frame of mind. Since its prime goals consist of the conformity to social standards and the removal of disorder and threats of extinction to society, all things in support of the maintenance of society's ideals and survival strategies present order and any disharmonies that would weaken society's strength and that would threaten to annihilate it at a future time are associated with disorder. In securing survival, a distinction



Figure 11.3 “Living in a Binary World”: Masked child perched on her mother’s lap, conforming to the adult image of the child as innocent, needing protection, and simultaneously exploring a forbidden quality of the “child”—the “fearful boogey.” Photograph used with permission from Justice Fancy Dress Club, Cape Coast.

is therefore made between orderly and disorderly child behavior. Orderly behavior is encouraged; disorderly behavior is ostracized. The denomination *misfit* is consequently stamped on all those imaginations and behaviors that do not conform to accepted standards of what is considered fit and meaningful for society; moreover, it is attached with punishments.

Among the Fante of Cape Coast, there prevails an adult preoccupation with "purity" and "innocence" as the default image of the child. This purely indigenous Akan ideal²⁶ corresponds with the adult-projected standard image of the child in the West.²⁷ Innocence is a vision of the child and of childhood that has been and that continues to be the "correct" one; however, this vision is farcical, as it never truly corresponds with the reality of "child" and of "childhood." Craig Martin, referencing Henry Giroux and Henry Jenkins, sees the adult imposition of childhood innocence as being detrimental to the child's creative growth and development. He writes, "While children possess far greater intelligence, resourcefulness, and strength than contemporary society dares allow (or acknowledge), the rubric of innocence denies them autonomy, regarding children instead as weak, dependent, and incapable."²⁸ Martin maintains that the autonomy granted to children has all but disappeared and that children are forced to find expressions within the constrictions of an adult-constructed and adult-imposed child identity. He parallels children's lives with the lives of prisoners. Like prisoners, children are constantly under surveillance and must conform to standards of behavior and dispositions dictated by the adult.²⁹ This unfortunate state of existence for the child means that a child must be "child" and must embrace a childhood that denies the expression and access of a whole host of capacities and fantasies which make vital contributions to its creative growth and wellbeing. For the child in Cape Coast, childhood is essentially a protectionist experience, similar to what Martin identifies as the experience of children in Western society.³⁰ A child's prison of innocence typically means a life protected from contact with anything that would rob the child of its innocence.

The grotesque, especially with its connection to malevolence and witchcraft, calamity, and bad omen in Akan-Fanti indigenous spirituality and folklore, is deemed most dangerous to the child and its innocence. Any fascination with and any personification of the grotesque on the part of the child is therefore tabooed, even in play. Children that display a morbid interest in monsters and monstrosities, mischief-makers, and evil creatures, which lurk about in the shadows and at night such as *Sasabonsam*, the forest dwelling devil, and *mboatialkwaatia*, fairies/dwarves, are considered perverse and strange, and in some cases, witchcraft-manipulated and demon-possessed. To speak admirably about these "evil things," or to act like them, to want to experience them, to want to embody their persona, even in play, is deemed an unacceptable intent in the child, which must be discouraged.



Figure 11.4 “Little Freak”: A young, unmasked child, takes advantage of the safe haven of the carnivalesque to connect with her inner freak—a “ghost” child. Photograph used with permission from Justice Fancy Dress Club, Cape Coast.

Yet “freaks” have always been a part of the Cape Coast child’s life; children both admire and are terrified by the uncanny freakish fiend and his shadow world. The roots of this mixed feeling lie in the Fante tradition of using threats of encounters with the grotesque in the ethical and moral training of children. From the very early years onward, children are bombarded with stories about a fiend in the shadows, who would spirit them away to its lonely lair in an unknown fantasy world beyond the village or town for any wrongdoing. The Kaakaamotobi is a typical example of a scare character employed in the arsenal of adults. He is used to coerce good behavior in children and conformity to the adult image of the “innocent” child. It was not uncommon in the days before the Twelve³¹ to see children fly under their beds at the sound of the *tiii-tiii* during Christmas for fear that the Kaakaamotobi, who, like a Zwarte Piet or a Knecht Ruprecht, was sent to punish naughty children with the birch, would enter their homes and carry them away in a sack to the shadow land beyond the village or town. Thus, within the child, fear and a strong aversion to this freakish fiend and its uncanniness is awakened; at the same time, however, these tales also kindle an interest in the fantasy and unknown world of this monster. The child is aroused to desire and to experience a world beyond the punishment for its wrongs and to tap into a world over which this monster seemingly has full control, a world that the child can access only through its imagination. It is at this point where the child’s imagination takes over that there emerges a bond between the grotesque and the child. It is here that the idea of the freakish used as a weapon of control by adults over children’s behavior loses its power and becomes the fantasy that emancipates children from the life-defining and experience-shaping power of the adult world. The evil that dwells beyond the veil of the physical eye, in the shadow lands, becomes that which liberates the free spirit of the child from the prison of the adult’s making.

LURE OF THE FANCY DRESS AS SAFE HAVEN FOR EXPERIENCING THE UNCANNY

Perhaps of all the creative activities available to the child living in the “childhood by the adult” in Cape Coast, there is none that promises to connect this child to the fascinating world of ugly monsters and misshapen characters in all its fullness than the entertainment and amusing street drama played out during Easter, Christmas, New Years Day, and harvest festivals. The characteristics of Fancy Dress parades—uncensored free-form and eccentric dance and body movements set to improvised music, as well as humans in disguise, hidden behind elaborate costumes and fearful masks—project an aesthetic power that appears to appeal to children who are seeking to connect with the world of the forbidden.

Fourteen-year-old Emmanuel first performed the Fancy Dress when he was seven. His decision to don the mask was made after witnessing the freedom with which his older brothers played the otherworldly characters from indigenous stories told by his elders, from storybooks read in school, and from the horror movies he occasionally snuck into the cinema hall to watch: "They would wear masks of *Sasabonsam*, *old witch*, *Freddie Krueger* from *Nightmare on Elm Street* and evil *Joker* from *Batman*, and they will act just like them. . . . It was . . . strange. . . . I loved that."³² He never understood his brothers' choice of particular masks or why they masked in the first place, but he knew why he wanted to be part of the parades:

"I have always been fascinated by the uncanny, and macabre. My grandfather would tell us scary stories about the Devil and how he punishes naughty children by making salted kebabs out of them, and such stories would leave us almost fainted in our seats. My mother used to threaten me a lot with visits from the bogeyman, and especially during the annual festivities she would ask masked men to scare me with their masks. . . . I think I was a bit troublesome in her estimation. The masks and antics of the masked men that I was confronted with were scary at first but as time went by they ceased to inspire fear, rather wonder. But of course I couldn't say that I thought the Devil suave. That is a dangerous confession to make in my community; besides I didn't want my mother to sense my fascination and stop sending boogies my way [Laughter]. . . . For me, performing in the Fancy Dress was a way to safely explore the freaky side of life and my fascination with it."³³

Emmanuel revealed that, while some children mask primarily for monetary gain, he and a few others in his troupe do it to experience the grotesque, the otherness that the mask and costume helps them to channel and the freakiness of the entire experience.³⁴ Asked which uncanny personas he has ever explored in disguise, he replied: "The Devil . . . Vampire and Sexy Witch Lady . . . who by the way is very beautiful on the outside but dances very dirty alongside her male partner when let loose. Her aim is to seduce unwitty young men to their death. I checked in the dictionary, and the English word for her is siren . . . yes, a siren. . . ."³⁵

Former child maskers Nana Andoh and Nana Otu explain the power within the Fancy Dress spectacle, which generates a constant inflowing traffic of children intent on donning mask and costume:

"In the Fancy Dress, all life as we know it dissolves, and in that state of existence there is created the chance for a new order and perspective. . . . We are creating new and different and dissolving the old. Within this atmosphere all is permitted and nothing sanctioned, . . . displays of eccentricity are permitted and welcome, for they melt rigid bounds of seriousness and 'correctness' which have constricted our society in the course of the year, and which must flow away for new ideas of right and wrong to be reconstructed."³⁶



Figure 11.5 “Sasabonsam”: Emmanuel channels the Forest Devil at the 2015 Fetu Afahye harvest festival, Cape Coast. ©2015. Photograph by Awo Sarpong.

In Fancy Dress, the carnival freedom and permissive spirit is the open door to free uncensored self-exploration and self-expression. It becomes the perfect space for the channeling of "misfit" behavior and thoughts, and for the exploration of forbidden connections with the uncanny freely before the public gaze, free from sanctions and censure, as well as for the sublimation of eccentricity and all that is freakish into a culturally higher and socially more acceptable activity: the parade. Here is a world where what is conventionally deemed "misfit" is paradoxically turned into something acceptable and celebrated. Here is a space where they can be free to explore and to experience the uncanny. It is this atmosphere of unbridled freedom that opens the door to seekers of the grotesque and that makes room for them to express and to recreate themselves in Fancy Dress.

FANCY DRESS AS EMERGENCE OF THE "FREAK" IN CHILDREN

"*Ye re puei!*" is a popular phrase used by maskers in Cape Coast. It translates literally as, "We are coming out!" *Puei* means to "come out," a "coming out" or "emergence" in the language of the Fante people. It describes the maskers' intent to perform in the Fancy Dress carnival. It also describes the performative act, the self-expression akin to that artistic style which Bakhtin terms *grotesque realism*:

This style transgresses the boundaries between bodily life and the field of art, bringing bodily functions into the field of art. It also celebrates . . . transgression and the disruption of expectations. It often performs a kind of symbolic degradation aimed at bringing elevated phenomena 'down to earth'—to the material, bodily or sensuous level. . . . This effect is achieved by emphasising the orifices and practices which connect the body to the world: eating, drinking, fucking, shitting, birth, and so on.³⁷

A carnivalesque reading of the act and art of *puei* sees the use of the parade by children to manifest freaky behaviors as a birthing of freakiness through the carnival body; in the instance of Fancy Dress, the carnival body represents the collective of children, whose intent is to give flow and expression to a restricted aspect of the Cape Coast child, an aspect that is labeled "misfit," and to the contra-forces of an intolerant society. The word speaks of more than a mere outing of a group of entertainers; it refers to an expulsion and release of an expression hitherto confined and officially restricted to the shadows. The word *puei* itself opens a window to understanding further Fancy Dress and its performance, as well as the actions of the child performer in the carnival parade. *Puei* is what flows out and over into the public domain



Figure 11.6 “A Fairy (middle) thronged by Evil-faced Harlequins”: Masked child performers at Cape Coast. ©2015. Photograph by Awo Sarpong.

when the veil of society, created to keep out what is disorderly, is suspended or blurred in the Fancy Dress parade. The carnival freedom of *puei* acts as a valve for emotional and psychological release to pent-up thoughts and feelings in the child;³⁸ it becomes an environment within which the “dirty,” “offensive,” “unsavory,” “obnoxious,” “disorderly,” and “hideous” is birthed in the body of child performers. Under the cover of the great freedom that *puei* represents, children birth devilish and mischievous eccentricities in the ways of Sasabonsam, fairies and evil harlequins.

The children live and relive “seduction” in the dance of the Sexy Witch Lady and her colorful Don Juan companion; they explore the repulsive character of the bloodthirsty Vampire, channel the grossness of Skull-head monsters, ghouls and ghosts, battered-faced goblins and dwarves, and embody the eerie primordial beast on the prowl. In this world revealed by *puei*, in this safe space that is Fancy Dress, all the infinite possibilities in the child’s imagination gets explored and released as the child engages in the “ugly,” the “forbidden,” the “repulsive,” and all that the mask of innocence excludes. *Puei* is most powerful, drawing out the “misfit” in the “innocent” child. In many ways, this force has transcended the Fancy Dress mask and costume, and released even within the unmasked the “freak” that lurks in every child.

CONCLUSION

The traditional emphasis of Fancy Dress performances on community entertainment, the appreciation of these performances as humor by the spectating public, coupled with the pervading adult notion of childhood masquerade as children’s imitations of adults and adult masquerade has led to readings of the Fancy Dress spectacle as a form of entertainment for the public and of the children who perform these masquerade dances as nothing more than community entertainers and playful, imitative performers in a long-standing, special art of satirical commentary³⁹ on life in Cape Coast society. Yet Fancy Dress masquerades are more than just public performances by child participants. Fancy Dress is a safe haven for unhindered explorations of eccentricity, grotesqueness, and the forbidden. The performance, in addition to its cathartic function through its humor, amusement, and entertainment, is a safe space for the expression of freakiness in children within a society that frowns upon eccentricity and where children feel more as misfits than adjusted members. During the parade, child performers are more than actors in a community drama, more than playful imitators, more than entertainers and agents of catharsis and healing of the community: they are self-creating, self-exploring “freaks” in procession.

NOTES

1. A local popular name for a type of rubber flip-flops common in Ghana.
2. Ecstatic dancing to brass band music.
3. A Fancy Dress stilt-walker.
4. Interview with Nana Andoh, June 24, 2015.
5. Ibid.
6. A common term in Ghana for water in plastic sachets, which hawkers sell.
7. A Fancy Dress Masquerade Club in Cape Coast.
8. Interview with Nana Otu, June 24, 2015.
9. Interview with Safohene Kwamena Twi, June 24, 2015.
10. Andrew Robinson, "Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power," *In Theory, Ceasefire Magazine*, published September 9, 2011, accessed August 20, 2015, <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-2/>.
11. Robinson, "Bakhtin."
12. On adult profiling of children, see C.A. Ackah, *Akan Ethics: A Study of the Moral Ideas and the Moral Behaviour of the Akan Tribes of Ghana* (Accra: Ghana UP, 1988), 79–104. See also Craig Martin, "'It's the End of the World!': The Influence of The Birds on the Evil Child Film," in *Children in the Films of Alfred Hitchcock*, ed. Debbie Olson (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 196–99; and James Holt McGavran, *Literature and the Child: Romantic Continuities, Postmodern Contestations* (Iowa: University of Iowa P, 1999), 23–37.
13. Henrietta Sarpong, "The Humanistic Values of the Dance in the Akan Society" (master's thesis, University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, 1990), 19–24.
14. See John Kedjanyi, "Masquerade Societies in Ghana," *Research Review, University of Ghana, Institute of African Studies* 3, no. 2 (1967): 51–57; Herbert Cole and Doran Ross, *The Arts of Ghana* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1977), 182; Keith Nicklin and Jill Salmons, "Hippies of Elmina," *African Arts* 38, no. 2 (2005): 60–65, 95; Simon Ottenberg and David A. Binkley, *Playful Performers: African Children's Masquerades* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 31; David A. Binkley and Allyson Purpura, *Playful Performers*, http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/playful/playful_performers.pdf, 16–17.
15. Although *tiii-tiii* is one of the local names used by children for the fancy dress movement and dance, especially the ecstatic/delirious type of dancing that emerges in the procession to fever pitched brass band music, it is onomatopoeic of the solo blast of the trumpet. The name derives from the sound made by the trumpets, which accompanies maskers during a parade.
16. Cole and Ross, *The Arts of Ghana*, 182.
17. During the research informants who were relying on oral history could not give actual dates but could only approximate those to the nineteenth century.
18. A Fante town, named after a big salt-generating pond in the town.
19. Kuw is Fante for Club.
20. No records or oral traditions exist that provided evidence of the formation of new clubs after the Ntsin and Tantre Kuw. The son of Sekum, however, informed us that according to his father there were small cultural troupes that performed regularly

for the townsfolk and that his father was originally a performer in one of such groups. When his father founded Anchors Fancy club, there was no Fancy Dress club in Cape Coast.

21. Anchors claims that masking came to Cape Coast in the 1970s. They consider themselves the first club in Cape Coast and the origins of the masking tradition in Sekondi. This gives an interesting insight into the locals' concept of origins, especially when it comes to source towns. There is a conflict between Saltpond and Sekondi as source towns since origin stories are always told from the perspective of the Clubs themselves and not according to the memory of the collective. Nicholas Sekum would say Fancy Dress is from Sekondi since his father brought home a club from that town.

22. Interview with Nicholas Sekum, July 1, 2015.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. See Beaty Rubens, "The Invention of Childhood—The Making of Childhood," *Open Learn, The Open University*, accessed July 6, 2015, <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/whats-on/ou-on-the-bbc-the-invention-childhood-the-making-childhood>; Hugh Cunningham. "Reinventing Childhood," *Open Learn, The Open University*, accessed July 8, 2015, <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history-re-inventing-childhood>; Heather Montgomery, "Different Cultures, Different Childhoods," *Open Learn, The Open University*, accessed July 5, 2015, <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/different-cultures-different-childhoods>; Carol Beckworth and Angela Fisher. *African Ceremonies Volume 1* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 14–15, 18.

26. The Western notion of childhood innocence may be construed as a product of the Romantic Age, which through colonialism was exported to Africa. Yet many indigenous child-related customs of the Akan Fante among whom the authors have lived for close to two decades suggest that the notion of innocence is indigenous to the Fante African cosmovision. Several ancient Fante proverb narratives and wise sayings, and rituals and symbols project "children" as people that have been conceived as innocent—helpless, ignorant, and immature, and thus to be nurtured, protected, taught and guided by the adults. Traditional leaders, queenmothers and linguists and custodians of the indigenous Fante culture of Cape Coast, corroborated this "innocent-pure" image of the child as indigenously Fante.

27. Martin, "'It's the End of the World!,'" 198–99; Mcgavran, *Literature and the Child*, 23–37.

28. Martin, "'It's the End of the World!,'" 198.

29. *Ibid.*, 198–99.

30. *Ibid.*, 198.

31. The twelve children, who were the first children to perform in a Cape Coast Fancy Dress parade.

32. Interview with Emmanuel, July 3, 2015.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. Interview with Nana Andoh, July 1, 2015.

37. Robinson, "Bakhtin."
38. Sarpong, "The Humanistic Values," 80.
39. Binkley and Purpura, *Playful Performers*, 2–5; Sarpong, "The Humanistic Values," 79–80.

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