

Morion Head Mask

TAGALOG, MARINDUQUE ISLAND PROVINCE, CENTRAL PHILIPPINES.

The Moriones of Marinduque island hold a street play where the distinguishing feature is the head mask worn by the participants. The first Morion (literally meaning “mask”) refers to the participants wearing Roman legionnaire dress with carved wooden helmets incorporating a frowning face. According to local tradition, this originated about 1884 inspired by the ritual of the church sacristan of Mogpog town (now the San Isidro Labrador Parish) named Matandang Bentong. He usually rings the church bells at 10 o'clock in the morning on Good Fridays and then puts on a mask and walks about the streets of Mogpog. He returns after two hours to once again ring the bells at high noon. It is said that it was from this that the first parish priest of Mogpog got the idea to encourage the people of Mogpog to come to the town and participate in the observance of Holy Week. He was able to convince seven prominent citizens to act as Moriones later. He made them wear Roman legionnaire uniforms together with the head mask and enact the story of Longinus.



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THE MASK is central to the Moriones. It is traditionally designed to resemble Caucasian features, specifically that of a Roman legionnaire. It is usually made to show the fierce aspect of a soldier with sharp, wide-opened eyes, a beard and moustache and a prominent nose. The mask is also painted in various colors – red, white, black, brown and yellow – depending on the taste of the carver.

In Mogpog town, a *morion* mask is traditionally set with a headgear called a *bulaklakan turbante*. It is called such because flowers (*bulaklak*) made out of different colors of Japanese paper are tucked onto this headgear. Traditionally, the number of flowers in the turbante signifies the number of years a person will participate in the Moriones. As he finishes the ritual each year, he removes a flower from his turbante until none is left, signaling the completion of his vow.

Another style of the Morion headgear is the crested or plumed helmet using local materials such as dog hairs, chicken feathers, straw or abaca strings, or broom strands. This style is more popularly used by nearby towns where the Moriones was also introduced. The *bulaklakan turbante* would remain, even up to this day, a distinct Mogpog design, although now rarely seen.

A morion mask is usually made out of the wood of *dapdap*, *dita* or *santol* trees which are abundant in Marinduque. Mask makers get their wood mainly from nearby forests. It takes months to carve each mask. Painting the mask takes about two weeks to finish and dry. At most, it takes seven to eight coatings of eight

different colors of flat wood enamel paint, dominantly red and black, to finish the work. For the head gear crest, different materials are used, such as chicken feathers, horse hair, abaca and straw, which are purchased in Manila. For the eyelashes, human hair or black thread is used.

It is only in recent years that morion masks have become the actual size of a man's face. Photographs taken in the 1970s show that the masks were much bigger, reaching the wearer's shoulder. This may be because the technology to make the mask fit the face became available to the makers only recently.

JTP



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(opposite page) Early form of the Marinduque Morion head mask.