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## The Mask of Longinus

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# The Mask of Longinus

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ALFREDO R. ROCES

THE making and wearing of masks is one of the earliest art forms developed by man. Hitherto, there has been little mention of masks in accounts of Philippine folk culture. Yet for over a century the people of Marinduque have been producing a Holy-Week mime in which masks of great interest play an integral part. Some time ago Mr. Macario Vivencio, a journalist, witnessed the ceremony while temporarily stranded on the island and wrote a brief account of it for the newspapers. Another brief account by Mr. Pedro Meléndez de León appeared recently in the PHILIPPINES FREE PRESS. However, it was not until Dean Alejandro R. Roces of Far Eastern University got wind of it that it became the subject of detailed study.

When Dean Roces, returning from a speaking engagement in Marinduque, brought back enthusiastic reports of the Longinus mime, a small group got together and decided to make a field trip to study the little known tradition in greater detail. The group included Mr. Alfredo Allende, the *chargé d'affaires* in the Philippines of the Republic of Argentina; Mr. Jorma Kaukonen, labor attaché of the U.S. Embassy; Mr. Floro Mercene of the Philippine Tourist and Travel Bureau; Mr. Pedro de León, Secretary of the Vice-President of the University of the Philippines; Major Arturo Sevilla; Dean Roces; and the author of this article. Much valuable assistance was provided the group by Mr. Alfredo Mendoza and Dr.

Diosdado Luna of Gasan, and by the mayors of Boac and Mogpog — all three towns of Marinduque.

It is in these three towns that the unique Holy-Week tradition to which we refer prevails. From Wednesday of Holy Week to Easter Sunday every year, hundreds upon hundreds of men and boys, masked and wearing distinctive costumes, roam the streets of these towns. They are called *moriones*.<sup>1</sup> The typical *morion*'s mask is of carved wood painted pink or red. It is wide-eyed, large-nosed and bearded. The headgear that goes with the mask sometimes resembles a Roman centurion's helmet, but more often it is a light bamboo frame of fanciful shape, covered with gaily colored tinsel and sprouting antennae of paper flowers. The rest of the *morion*'s costume is a far-fetched version of the uniform of a Roman legionary of the time of Christ. It is made of cardboard, cloth, and crepe paper. The predominant colors are red and yellow. A wooden sword, shield and lance complete the costume, although in place of these many *moriones* carry two cylindrical pieces of wood which are struck together in syncopated rhythm.

The story of the *moriones* goes back over a century and and a half — to 1807, according to the mayor of Mogpog, Mr. Rafael M. Lasic. In that year, the parish priest of the town, Padre Dionisio Santiago, organized a company of players to re-enact the Crucifixion. There were seven Roman soldiers in the play, one of them being Longinus, the legendary name of the soldier who opened Christ's side with a spear. We have not been able to check the accuracy of this account, but the oldest living inhabitants of Marinduque are agreed that the tradition of the *moriones* originated in the town of Mogpog, and that it is older than living memory.

The Longinus legend is based on John xix, 34: "One of the soldiers opened his [Christ's] side with a spear, and immediately there came forth blood and water." According to the CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA, the earliest mention of Longinus

<sup>1</sup> The origin of the word *morion* has escaped our efforts to trace it. Some claim it is a corruption of "centurion". The more probable derivation is from the Spanish word for "helmet": *morrión*.

<sup>2</sup> VIII (1913), 773.



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Plate II





Plate III



Plate IV



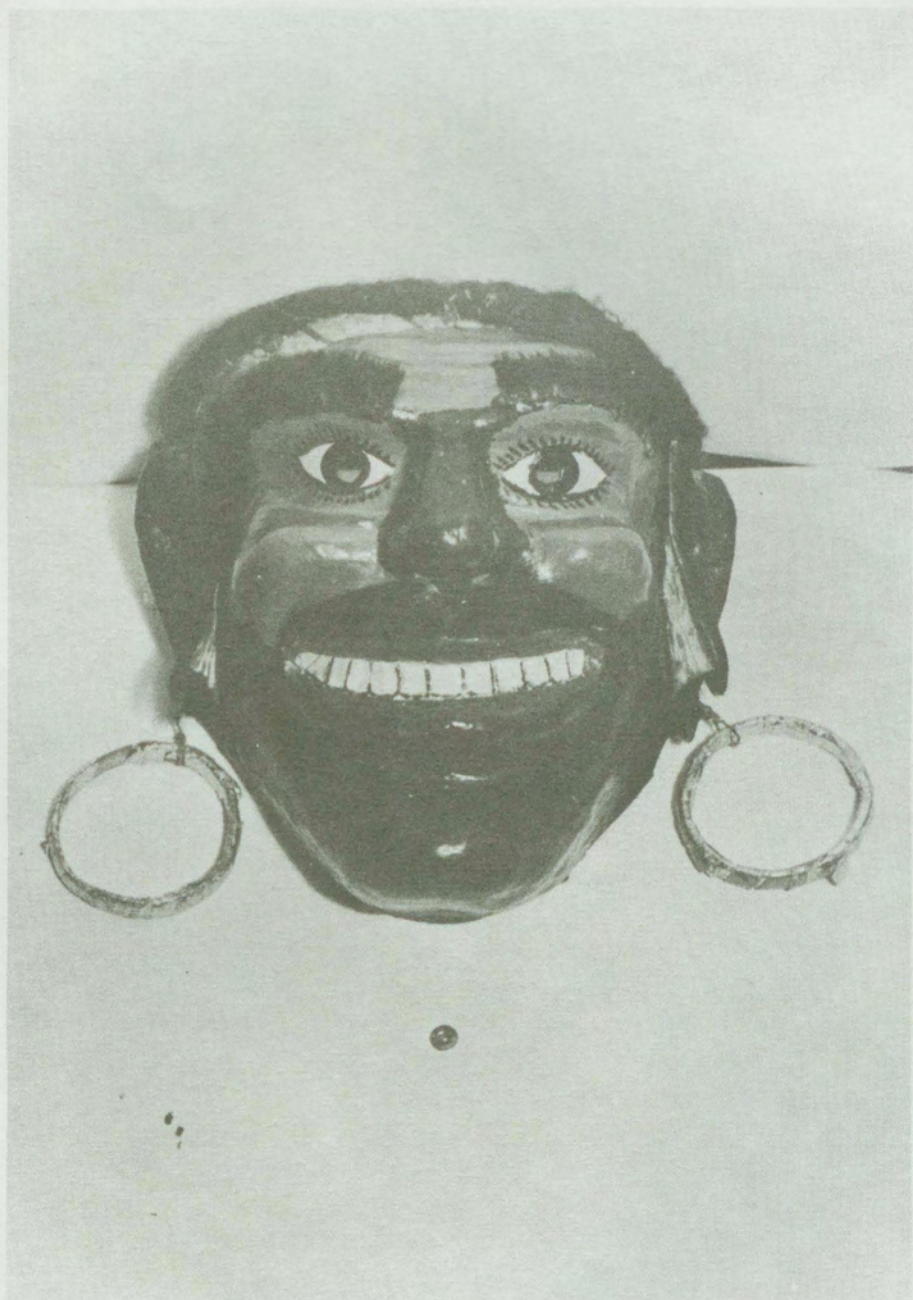


Plate V





Plate VI



Plate VII





Plate VIII



as the name of this soldier can be traced back to 586 A.D. There is a miniature in a manuscript preserved in the Laurentian Library of Florence which depicts Christ on the Cross and a soldier thrusting a lance into His side. Above the soldier's head his name — Longinus — is written in Greek characters. The legend goes on to state that Longinus was healed of ophthalmia by a drop of the Precious Blood spurting from the lance thrust, and that this miraculous cure occasioned Longinus' conversion to Christianity.

Fiction writers have often made use of the Longinus legend, the most recent being Louis de Wohl in his best-selling novel, *THE SPEAR*. More to our point, however, is the version of the legend in Padre Mariano Pilapil's *ANG MAHAL NA PASION NI POONG JESUCHRISTO*, for it probably from this verse narrative in Tagalog of Christ's Passion that the idea for the *moriones* was derived. Mr. Pedro de León, in the article mentioned earlier, summarizes the Pilapil version of the legend as follows:

Longinus—the PASION states—was the centurion of the soldiers who were in charge of the execution of Jesus and the two thieves. It was he who pierced the Lord's side; when His body was claimed by Joseph of Arimathea for proper burial, it was Longinus whom Pilate ordered to assemble a detail to guard the sepulchre of the Lord. The high priests feared the remains might be stolen by the followers of Jesus and the "disappearance" utilized as evidence of His Resurrection.

The story goes on to say that when Jesus did rise from the grave Longinus ran to town to spread the news. Alarmed, the chief priests and scribes bribed the other soldiers and ordered them to kill Longinus. The story says that Longinus gave himself up voluntarily. Now certain that he would be put to death, he told his captors that he was converted when the blood which spurted from Jesus' side restored the sight of his blind eye. He swore that he himself had beheld the Resurrection. While he was thus praising the Lord, one of the soldiers struck him with a sword and cut his head off.<sup>3</sup>

In the town of Gasan the part of Longinus in the mime has been played by the same man for thirty years. He has undertaken it as a solemn promise or "vow" — *panata* in

<sup>3</sup> "Longinus and His Lance", *PHILIPPINES FREE PRESS* (16 April 1960), pp. 120-121.

Tagalog — in gratitude for a favor received in answer to prayer. His *panata* is universally respected and he can play the part of Longinus as long as he wishes. The other *morionés* in the mime play their respective parts because of similar "vows".

On Wednesday of Holy Week the Gasan Longinus appears with an enormous one-eyed mask. He is a conspicuous and arresting figure in the religious processions of Holy Thursday and Good Friday. He is present at Mass on Easter Sunday. As soon as the *Gloria* is intoned, he rushes out of the church and runs around the town to proclaim the glory of the risen Lord, as his legendary counterpart did in the story. Sometimes he does this in a different mask, with two eyes, to suggest his miraculous cure. After announcing the glad tidings he goes into hiding, for now the other *moriones* run after him to kill him.

It is a thrilling sight to see. The streets are deserted save for roving bands of *moriones*, masked and attired in their colorful costumes, searching for Longinus. In and out of the faded, crumbling, colonial houses he darts, hiding from his pursuers, then flees to the river bank. He is sighted, and the other *moriones* give chase, a sweeping flood of color and sound. Their pounding feet crunch across the pebbles of the dry river bed as they cut off avenues of escape and surround their quarry, standing helpless in knee-deep water. Longinus does not give up without a struggle. Thrice he is captured: thrice he escapes. The fourth time he is cornered, his strength completely spent, and his hands are bound.

Flanked by *verdugos* (executioners) he is marched through the crowd behind a blaring brass band to a prepared platform which is to be his scaffold. The *verdugos* flourish their swords over him menacingly. The spectators plead with the executioners to spare him. At this point Longinus kneels and speaks to the assembled multitude. He tells how the blood of the Saviour restored sight to his blind eye. He proclaims his faith and bears witness to the Resurrection. As he shouts that Christ is risen, the executioner's sword flashes in the air and he is beheaded in a mock ceremony.

The martyrdom of Longinus marks the end of the Holy Week observance. The masks are shed and the costumes put away for another year. There is feasting and merry-making and Longinus often plays host to his fellow *moriones* at an enormous meal.

Although the *moriones* are supposed to represent the Roman soldiers and Temple guards of Jerusalem, they do not keep very strictly to these roles. They will perform folk dances upon request, or serenade the ladies. They play pranks on their more sober fellow townsmen and frighten the children. They wander through the streets striking their cylindrical sticks (*kalutang*) together and producing a rhythmic, musical tinkling. Instead of the more authentic lances, some carry carved wooden snakes or whips.

In recent years the fertile imagination of the people has gotten out of hand. Some of the *moriones* now dress up as musketeers, or as replicas of the popular motion-picture swash-buckler Zorro, or as Mau-Mau tribesmen, or even as women. As for the masks, anything is likely to turn up; a clay pot, a basketball, a dried puffer-fish, a discarded army gas mask.

One thing the *moriones* keep most strictly is their anonymity. They keep their identities secret even from their own families. When addressed they disguise their voice or utter birdlike sounds in reply. If for some reason they have to remove their masks, a handkerchief tied around the neck is raised to cover the face from the nose down.

One interesting feature of the tradition is the registration of the participants. All *moriones* must register at the town hall. Upon payment of a registration fee of fifty centavos — which goes to charity or the fiesta fund — the *morion* is given a piece of cloth about three by five inches with a number printed on it. He must display this number on his costume and he cannot take part in the mime without it. It is said that this custom of registration dates back to the Revolution when *insurrectos* infiltrated the town disguised as *moriones*. After that the Spanish government required all *moriones* to register and display their registration numbers, and the practice was continued through the American regime.



The masks are extremely interesting. Some of them, carved from the wood of the coral tree (*dapdap*), are over seventy years old. Certain stylized features are immediately discernible, such as the decorative incisions in the beard and hair line. The face is painted red or deep pink. The eyes are large and staring. Holes are burned through the pupils. The large nose and open mouth give the mask an oafish look. An occasional touch of humor is injected by covering one of the front teeth with gold foil. A frown is cut or painted between the heavy brows. The ears are large and flat. Wrinkle lines radiate from the outer ends of the ovals that form the eyes. In the case of extra large masks, the wearer sees through the open mouth. Although the masks are supposed to represent Romans and Jews, they are probably caricatures, whether deliberate or unconscious, of Spanish soldiers. For this reason they are particularly interesting as visual impressions of European faces seen through Filipino eyes. They are all red-faced, big-nosed, large-eyed and bearded. They are not noble or kindly faces. They portray either anger or stupidity. In execution they resemble very closely the Japanese *kyogen* mask, especially the character of Kentoku.<sup>4</sup> The *morion* mask, however, does not have so highly stylized a form, and hence each participant wears a distinct face. Even the Longinus mask does not have a fixed form.

The fanciful headgear, called *turbante*, is part of the mask. It is what holds the mask in place and is firmly attached to it with wire and string, and an entirely different effect is created without it. All sorts of delightful things shoot out from the fantastic hat: bright-colored foil, paper flowers, butterflies, pinwheels that spin at the slightest breeze.

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<sup>4</sup> *Kyogen* is the Japanese comedy form, as *Noh* is tragedy. The masks used in a *kyogen* play are described as "non-smiling masks which induce laughter by some comical element of contradiction." Kentoku is a Buddhist priest who is said to have been suddenly exposed to a cold wind. The expression on the Kentoku mask is a frozen grimace of embarrassment. Other *kyogen* characters are Kobuaku (mask representing an angry cross-eyed demon), Noborihige (a simple-minded ghost), and Saru (a monkey). These masks are highly polished in form and are of great artistic merit.

As we said earlier, the Longinus mime is unique to the three Marinduque towns of Gasan, Boac and Mogpog. Some towns of Mindoro and Quezon Province have it, but their origin is traceable to Marinduque. There are still many loose threads connected with the observance which we hope to tie up by a more extensive study. Are there any possible connections, for instance, between this tradition and similar traditions in Europe and Asia? What information is available regarding Padre Dionisio Santiago, the reputed founder of the mime? We hope that sufficient interest in this unique tradition will be aroused to answer these and other related questions.

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<sup>5</sup> A Venezuelan Epiphany mime has Shepherds with much the same *turbantes* as the Marinduque *moriones*, though with slightly different masks. But this may be just a coincidence. See Lourdes Dubuc de Isea, "San Miguel Arcángel de Burbusay", *REVISTA SHELL* (March 1960), p. 34.