

Anthropological reflection on Philippine masks

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It may be generally observed that the varied indigenous traditions of the Philippines did not have prevalent use of masks in their rituals and festivals, because of certain religious and cultural proscriptions. In some cultural nuances, the mask had a connotation of duplicity and betrayal, while in others, it had strict ritual purpose.

In the Visayas and Mindanao, the use of masks were influenced by the Sanskrit epic traditions, as the peoples of these cultures were either bearers of Indic culture or had cultural interaction with the ancient empires of India and/or its Southeast Asian colonies. In modern times, masks are employed to convey particular messages in festivals and theater practices.

Indigenous masks

Indigenous masks were largely made of wood, the most common material for carving in the timber-rich pre-colonial Philippines. They were almost always rudimentary, because they represented otherworldly characters and, therefore, to carve them in complete shapes would have been presumptive and an infringement against the spirits.

Ifugao bulol

Oftentimes referred to as Rice Guardian, the Bulol, still has an essential role in the ritual life of the Ifugaos of the Cordillera, the mountain region of Northern Luzon. They were actually carved from trunks of wood and stood guard at the entrances of homes or grain reserves. They were carved roughly or smoothly depending upon the wealth and social standing of those who commissioned them and according to the skill of the carver. Any mask that is derived from the Bulol, has the same function; hence, they are placed in the same manner and may not be worn in any ceremony.

Visayan burial masks

The burial masks of the Visayas (Panay, for example) were indicative of the importance of the deceased and the Visayan's fondness for gold and precious materials. Gold masks were hammered and embossed, providing separate materials for covering the eyes and mouth. The masks are a testament to ancient jewelry craft and the abundance of gold in the islands. The practice ended with the arrival of European colonizers.

Gigantes of Lucban

Made of bamboo frames and papier maché covering, the giants of Lucban, Quezon Province troop to the festive beat in August. The characters include the proverbial Filipino farmer-couple, Juan de la Cruz and Maria and their two children, a boy and a girl. The festival also features a giant bull that runs around the town after scampering people who pretend to be terrorized. Firecrackers attached to its body cause genuine fright to children and spectators.

The Gigantes celebrate the core socio-cultural unit; the family is the primary cultural value of the Filipino. The Giants are an analogy to our fundamental social and cultural strengths. The farming family is still an indispensable unit of society, as it has always been.

Comparing it to the Japanese Bonraku puppet, which has a full size and conducted externally by the puppeteer, the Gigante, a much larger puppet measuring at least four meters high, is actually a mask that covers the entire body. It is held by the shoulders and it takes months of practice to perfect its operation, since the giant is expected to dance, march, kneel and do other things.

Moriones of Marinduque

One of the oldest and most colorful festivals in the Philippines, the Moriones festival is celebrated during the Holy Week, following the passion, crucifixion, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a pantomimic dramatization that complements other Lenten rituals such as the traditional self flagellation by the penitents and the chanting of Christ's passion, which in some version will include parts of the Book of Genesis and the Revelation.

The Moriones is the story of the Roman centurion, Longinus, whose blind eye was healed by the blood sprayed from the side of Christ which he pierced. He subsequently converted to Christianity, thus making him an outlaw. He is captured and beheaded.

The Morion is a rather large mask or visor, part of the Roman covering the face. The Morion mask includes the Roman face and is completed with the Roman costume. Besides its dramatic effect, it signifies the wearer's distancing from the character; meaning, the actors are faithful followers of Christ, while the characters (Roman soldiers) they represent are pagans and persecutors of Christ and his disciples. This dichotomy is important, because no fervent Christian wants his or her piety put in doubt. The Morion mask is among the most collectible of Philippine festival memorabilia.

Masks of Masskara

Among the most recent additions to the Philippine festival vocabulary, the week-long Masskara Festival of Bacolod City, the provincial capital of Negros Occidental, has become world-renown and, therefore, one of the most successful festivals in terms of participation and attendance.

Coined from the words mass (multitude, many) and kara (from the Spanish cara—face), the festival takes on the color and gaiety of the Mardi Gras of Rio de Janeiro. It celebrated in the last half October and is punctuated by street dancing, mask competitions and pageantry that last well into the night.

Enlivened after the ouster of the Marcos Regime and the sugarcane industry crisis that almost impoverished the sugar barons and the traditional aristocratic families of the city, Masskara, has evolved an egalitarian statement—all are equal under the mask.

The donning of masks is a collective witness to the resiliency and pride of every Negrense who would defy adversity by creative social and cultural reinvention. Notwithstanding its superficial qualities, it is a safety-valve for relieving social tensions that normally characterize the relationship between landlords and peasants; the haves and the have-not. The mask is both a sign of disguise and hope, of pretension and dream.

Use of masks in Philippine theater

Contemporary Philippine Theater. Masks are extensively used in theater productions that recall folk tales, surviving religious dramas, myths and legends or to profile larger than life characters or social villains.

The Indic Influence in the Masks of Mindanao Theater. Theater productions of Mindanao, with its emphasis on the historico-Cultural struggles of its different indigenous people, find use for character masks culled from the Indic epic traditions of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Known for exotic theatrical movements in dance, dance-drama and chant tradition, Mindanao theater practice adds the visual impact of elaborate masks for spectacle and emphasis.

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