

Crisencia Molina Maldonado
Yoeme Deer Singer and Pascola Mask Carver

Introduction by

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On Display December 6, 2014 - March 1, 2015
Xipe Projects: Latin American Masks and Popular Art

Crisencio Molina Maldonado

Yoeme Deer Singer and Pascola Mask Carver

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The music and songs of the pahko in which the *pascola* dances "link the gritty world of the pahko rama with the ethereal flower world, a world seen with one unseen, a world that is very much here with one that is always over there."

-- Larry Evers and Felipe Molina
Yaqui Deer Songs: Maso Bwikam





Criscencio Molina Maldonado with one of his hand-carved "payaso" masks at the home of Tom Kolaz.
Image © Thomas Kolaz.

Foreword

One of the most exciting developments for *Xipe Projects* in the last year has been our acquisition of a number of *pascola* masks from the Rio Yaqui carver Crisencio Molina Maldonado.

According to Tom Kolaz, Fellow at the Arizona State Museum, Crisencio is “the best *Yoeme* (Yaqui) *pascola* mask carver I am aware of making masks today.” And Tom should know. He is currently doing research for a book on the *pascola* masking tradition, research that involves working closely with contemporary carvers and *pascolas*, allowing masters like Crisencio to interpret the tradition for him.

As Tom explains in his introduction, Crisencio carves masks that both continue and redefine the tradition for our time. While many of his masks are the traditional human and goat faces, other masks push the tradition forward a bit, sometimes even given a *lucha libre* touch. As an elder deer dance singer at the ceremonies, Crisencio is well respected by *Yoemem* in Sonora and Arizona and especially by the *pascola* dancers for whom he will often custom fit the masks to the individual dancer’s face.

His art is inspiring.

With sincere thanks to Tom, we at *Xipe Projects* are both excited and pleased to be able to introduce you to *Crisencio Molina Maldonado; Yoeme Deer Singer and Pascola Mask Carver*.

-SXipe



Crisencio

Molina Maldonado

Crisencio was born September 19, 1958 in Pitahaya, Sonora, Mexico. He now lives in Potam, one of the original *Yoeme* (Yaqui) pueblos. He comes from a very traditional *Yoeme* family. He sings and plays the rasps (*hirukiam*) at dozens of ceremonies (*pahkom*) in the pueblos along the Río Yaqui in Sonora and in southern Arizona *Yoeme* communities throughout the year. The *Yoeme* population in Sonora, their homeland, is approximately 35,000+ and there are approximately 15,000-20,000 *Yoemem* in Arizona, many living on their reservation south of Tucson, AZ.

Crisencio learned to play the wood rasps that sit on top of half gourd resonators from his father, Miguel Molina Flores, who was a deer dancer (*maso*) as a young man but dedicated his life to being a deer singer (*maso bwikame*) the last few decades. The deer singers/musicians provide the music for the *maso* during the ceremonies. Crisencio has been a *maso bwikame* and a *pascola* mask carver since he was a teenager. His masks are worn by *pascola* dancers (*pahko'olam* which translates as "old men of the fiesta" *pahko'ola* = singular) and also sold to collectors. He carves masks that are both traditional and innovative. The *pahko'olam* prefer human style face masks painted the traditional black, white and red colors. Collectors enjoy his animal masks depicting goats, roosters, dogs, birds, gorillas and mountain lions. Over the last few years many *pascola* dancers have worn Crisencio's animal masks during the ceremonies.

His masks are extremely well carved, mainly from cottonwood root, and painted with a full palette of colors. The tufts of brow and beard hair come from horsetail hair as well as horse mane hair. He collects his wood in the riparian and wooded areas of Sonora and collects horsehair from friends. His paints are store purchased. In earlier times, the masks, which all measure approximately 5" by 8", were coated with vegetal dyes or mineral pigments and the hair tufts were made from twisted plant fibers such as agave. The oldest masks I am aware of, with good documentation, date to the latter half of the 1800s – and there are very few of them. The majority reside in European and North American museum collections and in a very few private collections.

He makes other items used in the ceremonies such as glass bead and abalone shell necklaces worn by the *maso* and *pascolas* which are called *hopo'orosim* and the wood hand rattles used by *pascolas* called *sená'asom*].

Pascolas are the ritual hosts of all *Yoeme pahkom*. They open and close the ceremonies and no *pahko* can take place without *pahko'olam*. Most *pahkom* also include a deer dancer and his musicians, but they are not essential to the ceremony. Ironically more people are familiar with the deer dancer than with the *pascolas*. They dance primarily in a *pahko rama* (ceremonial shade structure) usually found on the opposite end of the plaza from a chapel or church.

The *pahko'olam* dance two distinct styles during the all night *pahkom*. One style of dance is with their masks worn on the side or back of their heads. Their arms hang down by their sides and they face the musicians playing the European instruments, the violin and harp, while step dancing. The second style of dance is with their masks worn over their faces, a hand rattle being played while they keep time to the music of the *tampaleo*, a musician who plays the indigenous instruments, the drum and cane flute at the same time. The *pascolas* take turns dancing these two styles of dance throughout the night.

The origin of the *pahko'ola* is probably lost in time. But many say that he was the son of the Devil. The *Yo'emem* wanted to put on a *pahko* but did not have any *pascolas* so they asked the Devil if they could borrow his son. The Devil agreed but instructed his son not to yell or shout because that would scare him away. Before the *pahko* the *Yo'emem* spoke with the Devil's son and told him to make lots of noise and light bottle rockets and fireworks to scare away any evil. He did and the Devil, startled, took off running. To this day, the *pahko'olam* make lots of noise after entering the *pahko rama* at the beginning of each ceremony.

The *pahko'olam* are not part of any of the church societies like the *matachines* and *chapayekam* (the Yaquis were converted to Christianity by the Catholic priests who entered their territory beginning in the 1500s). They are secular but dedicate themselves to Jesus and saints. In earlier times they dedicated ceremonies before a hunt to honor the *yoawam* (animals) and ask their forgiveness for having to kill them.

Crisencio remains grounded in his culture and his role in the *pahkom* is an integral part of his life – it is his life. I have been fortunate to be included in a small way in this yearly cycle of ceremonies for almost 40 years. Crisencio and many other mask carvers and *pahko'olam* have allowed me access into a world few non-*Yo'emem* observe. But the knowledge that I possess regarding *Yoeme* masking traditions is infinitesimal compared to what is known by traditional *Yo'emem*. There are aspects of the masking traditions that I will never know or understand. Crisencio has a way of letting me know when I cross the line in my questioning. If I asked something that would take a lifetime to understand, he simply answers, "*porque es la tradicion.*"

-Thomas M. Kolaz
December 2014



While many of Crisencio Molina's *pascola* masks seem different from the older *pascola* masks, it is both important and fascinating to realize that most of these unusual-looking masks have deep roots in the tradition.

Perhaps the least traditional-looking of Crisencio's masks are the two clown masks, but they surely reflect one of the *pascola*'s most important roles; he is a ritual clown, entertaining the audience while guiding them through the long, serious night of the *pahko*. The rooster, too, fulfills a traditional role as he dances to an old song denoting the coming of the dawn and the ending of the *pahko*.

But whatever it looks like, the mask makes the *pascola*, sets him apart as an emissary from the world of the spirit, the flower world, over by the dawn.





Gallo (rooster) masks like the one featured on the left are among the most interesting masks made by Crisencio. They are not always worn in the *pahko*, but when they are, it is for a dance at sunrise. The *tampaleo* (drummer) plays a special song as the *gallo's* dance announces the dawn. Not all festivals follow this old tradition, not all carvers carve *gallo* masks, and not all *pascolas* know the dance. But Crisencio remembers.

Sadly, it is not only the song for the *gallo* that is dying; the entire tradition of the *pahko* is losing ground. Tom Kolaz mentioned to us that he bought his first mask almost forty years ago, and the carver of the mask told him even then that the tradition was all but lost. Although the process of erosion continues, the tradition still lives because of Crisencio and other carvers and elders like him.







While the *pascola* mask featured on the opposite page is one of Crisencio's, the other, older mask featured on *this* page gives you a sense of the development of the *pascola* mask carving tradition in which Crisencio Molina works.

This mask, collected in the early 1920's, is notable for its fine carving and makes a very interesting comparison to the wonderfully carved masks of Crisencio Molina, carved almost a century later.



Thomas M. Kolaz has been involved in Yoeme culture, particularly their masking traditions, for almost 40 years. He is a Museum Fellow at the Arizona State Museum and a Research Associate at the Southwest Center, both on the University of Arizona campus in Tucson, AZ.

He is currently writing a book on the masking traditions of the Yaqui (Yoeme) and Mayo (Yoreme).

