

History of the Barong Tagalog

Barong is actually short for Barong Tagalog, which describes the formal men's wear of the Philippines. It is properly referred to as the 'Baro ng Tagalog' (dress of the Tagalog). Contracting the first two words produces 'Barong,' which literally means 'dress of.' So, if we want to be correct, we wouldn't say just 'Barong.' But, the slang way of referring to one of the beautiful formal shirts is simply Barong. Yes, the Barong Tagalog is a dress, a garment, a coat in itself. It is not merely a 'shirt'. If it were, then it would need a coat or a jacket over it to qualify as formal wear and would have to be worn tucked inside the trousers.

'Baro' = Word for 'dress' in the Philippines, Tagalog dialect

'Baro ng Tagalog' = 'dress of the Tagalog' describes the formal 'dress' or upper garment for men in the Philippines

'Barong Tagalog' = contracted form of the above

'Barong' = literally means 'dress of' - but commonly used to refer to the formal men's wear in the Philippines

History of the Barong Tagalog

The Baro ng Tagalog, or Barong Tagalog, has evolved from pre-Hispanic native wear to the "Philippines national wear" over the course more than four centuries. Throughout its evolution, various factors have influenced the look and meaning of the Barong Tagalog. We'll take a journey through the history of the Barong Tagalog, along the way seeing glimpses of what they looked like The timeline, below, is based on excerpts from "The Barong Tagalog - The Philippines' National Wear" by Visitacion R. de la Torre.

Timeline: The Barong Tagalog History:

16th century / Pre-Spanish. The natives of Ma-I (the Philippines as it was called before the Spaniards renamed the archipelago), in particular, the Tagalog people of Luzon, wore baro. The Tagalog males wore a sleeve-doublet of rough cotton cloth called canga..



In the 1700s, the Spanish brought in their dressy shirt with standing collar.

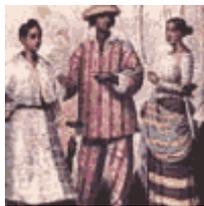


The ilustrado wore the baro with a "high Elizabethan collar trimmed with lace and adorned with a gem or a big button". It extended just above the knees and was worn with a thin sash high across the waist...

Early nineteenth century: the baro was shortened and the Elizabethan collar was replaced by a short one, sans lace...



Modification to the baro quickened in the 19th century as the natives brushed elbows with the Europeans more frequently... and around 1859, the baro acquired the romantic look. It was embroidered all over whereas embroidery had previously been confined to the chest alone...

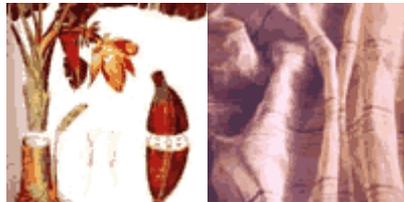


The tradition of embroidery.

The ordinary folk, on the other hand, wore their everyday dress as they had done for a hundred years: loose shirts of coarse quimara cloth, often blue or blue-and-white-striped, and worn over trousers. An added flair was a kerchief flung over the shoulder and worn as a putong on the head...

1898: By the time the Filipino nationalists had won their fight for independence, the baro ng Tagalog, or Barong Tagalog as it was popularly called from then on, with ruffled collar and cuffs and more elaborate designs, reappeared...

1920's: a style emerged that was considered "the most authentic" Barong Tagalog. Made of rengue abaca fiber, it was worn over camisa de chino (a Chinese collarless, T-shirt) and sported a design on the half-open. With plain collar, and pleated backs, it was the vogue till 1930...



1935: under the tutelage of President Manuel L. Quezon, a variation of the Barong Tagalog, known as the "Commonwealth Barong Tagalog" or the Barong Tagalog with the Tydings Mc Duffie motif became popular...



The baro gained hope when the "man of the masses," President Ramon Magsaysay (1955-1957), chose to wear the Barong Tagalog in all official and personal affairs. He was attributed the signal honor of using the Barong Tagalog during his inauguration and during his brief term, made it fashionable as business and formal wear...



The term of ex-President Diosdado Macapagal (1961-1964) saw the return of all over embroidery on the Barong Tagalog although it certainly was confined to formal functions...

1975: President Ferdinand E. Marcos issued a decree proclaiming Barong Tagalog Week (June 5 - 11) and designated the Barong Tagalog as "the national attire." The presidential act was meant to focus nation-wide attention on the Filipino national dress to wider use and enhance its export potential...



Today, the Filipinos (as well as non-Filipinos) continue to wear the Barong Tagalog with distinguishing acceptance world-wide.

The text below is chapter 1 of "The Barong Tagalog - The Philippines National Wear" by Visitacion R. de la Torre, reprinted in entirety.

How the Barong Tagalog Evolved In History

As the Philippines' national dress, the Barong Tagalog enjoys a distinction all its own. Its fine needlework or hand-painted designs in cool cotton or handwoven pina or jusi have given it a flair that has won international recognition and acceptance. President Ferdinand E. Marcos, who has worn the Barong Tagalog with such impeccable grace and searing devotion, underscored its prestige when he issued in 1975 a decree proclaiming Barong Tagalog Week (June 5-11) ([click for more](#)) and more significantly, officially designating the Barong Tagalog as "the national attire". The presidential act was meant to focus nation-wide attention on the Filipino national dress to wider use and enhance its export potential. As it is, both the wide use and export potential of the Barong Tagalog have been explored, its full impact just a matter of time. What deserves another look is the manner the Filipino national costume has evolved and grown, picking up and shedding features fashion-related or otherwise in its journey from pre-Hispanic native wear to national dress. But first, a few things have to be straightened out. Barong Tagalog is properly referred to as the "Baro ng Tagalog" (dress of the Tagalog) and it cannot be contracted to simply "Barong" since that would be equivalent in English to saying "He is wearing a dress of". The word "Barong", one realizes, means "dress of". If one wishes to shorten the phrase, then it would be "Baro" or "dress". Yes, the Barong Tagalog is a dress, a garment, a coat in itself. It is not a "shirt". If it were, then it would need a coat or a jacket over it to qualify as formal wear and would have to be worn tucked inside the trousers. The Earliest Baro

The earliest known fact on the "Baro ng Tagalog" discloses that the natives of Ma-I (the Philippines as it was called before the Spaniards re-discovered the archipelago), and in particular, the Tagalogs, who lived in the island of Luzon, wore baro. **The Tagalog males** wore a sleeve-doublet of rough cotton cloth called canga, reaching slightly below the waist, collarless and with the opening in front. Depending on their social rank and badge of courage, the doublet was either red, black, blue or white (red for the chiefs and brave men, black or white for the ordinary citizens). Their loins were covered with a sort of colored pagne called bahague which hung between the legs to mid-thigh. The Tagalog women also wore a sleeve-dress of the same color as the men's, although their clothing was shorter than the men's. Too they wore a cotton pagne attached to the waist and reaching to the feet but a colored belt accented the grace and suppleness of their figures. Other historical sources describe the personal attire of the Tagalog men, presumably those of the upper crust, as made of fine linen or Indian muslin which barely reached the waist. It was a short loose jacket (chamarreta) without collar and fitted with short sleeves. For breeches or pants, they wore "a richly colored cloth, which was generally edged with gold, about the waist and brought up between the legs, so that the legs were decently covered to the middle of the thigh from there down; feet and legs were bare. Called saluales, they were also worn loose and wide and made of linen.

These were not open in front, but fastened on one side. The Visayans of the Visayan islands, wore, similarly a "robe" (marlota) or jacket (baquero) made without a collar and reaching quite down to the feet, and embroidered in colors. The entire dress, in fine, was in the moorish style, and was truly rich and gay..... The Tagalog and Visayan men bound their forehead and temples with long, narrow strips of cloth which they called putong. About their necks, they sported "gold necklaces, wrought like spun silk, and on their arms, armlets of wrought gold (called calombigas) which were huge and made of different patterns. Others wore strings of precious stones such as cornelians and agates, blue and white stones and certain cords, covered with black pitch in many foldings, as garters." A Franciscan friar, Fray San Francisco de San Antonio in his *Cronicas* added that the men's baro was "loose to the wind, with wide sleeves and without cuffs." For church functions and other official ceremonies, the chiefs and others wore a black woven smock reaching to their feet with sleeves fitted to the wrists over said clothes. They called this baron mahaba or long baro, a very modest and proper dress also worn loose.

A little after the eighteenth century, the baro was shortened and the Elizabethan collar was replaced by a short one, sans lace. The loose trousers were likewise changed. They became tight and adorned with big military stripes which were then in vogue. These loose trousers, however, made a comeback in 1750, this time, trimmed with laces or embroidered at the edges, a fashion that lasted till the first quarter of the 19th century. Moreover, it had no buttons and to fasten it around the waist, there were three openings, one in front and two at each side,

with silk strings. During this period, the handkerchief, usually of colored silk and inspired by the European cravat, was introduced to go with the attire. By the 1840s the trousers that the Indios wore together with the baro assumed the shape and fit of real-honest-to-goodness pants as they are known today. The men wore plain, long-sleeved loose shirts made of handwoven cotton, silk, sinamay, jusi and lupis. Interviews with some authorities on Philippine costume or fashion history yield the popular belief that the baro is not tucked in because it simply looks better if it is tucked out. Aesthetically speaking, the baro with its loose style, and woven embroidery and sheer fabric is for display, for exhibition. How in the world would the baro attain full radiance, so to speak, if it hides beneath pants and belts? Anyhow, the tradition of wearing the Barong Tagalog tucked out has been with us for centuries and Filipinos are not exactly anxious or even bothered about the rationale of such fashion style. In coat form, though of much cruder fabric and done less expertly, the coat-styled baro was worn by the *teniente del barrio* or *gobernadorcillo*. Originally termed *pinukpok*, (perhaps because it was made of beaten abaca fibers called *pinukpok*), this coat-styled baro was long-sleeved.

The Ilustrado's Baro Fashion, after the Spaniards came, was largely unchanged. The interesting mixture of Muslim, Chinese and indigenous characteristics began to take on Spanish Occidental influences only in the latter part of the seventeenth century. **In the 1700s**, the Spanish brought in their dressy shirt with standing collar. They also taught the natives to wear shoes and hats. But strangely enough, only the rich natives with Spanish connections could do so. Why the baro was confined to the *ilustrado* class (the male members of the families who owned landed estates or who were invested with some authority in the community) cannot really be ascertained.

The *ilustrado* wore the baro with a "high Elizabethan collar trimmed with lace and adorned with a gem or a big button". It extended just above the knees and was worn with a thin sash high across the waist. The trousers that went with it were loose and of course, this kind of attire required the use of slippers, if not shoes. One source claims that in wearing the baro, the *ilustrados* were not allowed to tuck it under their waistband or have any pockets. It is said that this prohibition was meant to humiliate the "Indios" as a constant reminder that despite the trappings of wealth or power, they remained natives. Or simply to make them easily identifiable to their Spanish rulers. These allegations though deserve further study. Another source has it that the baro is tucked out for health reasons. With the *sinamay* or *pinukpok* (locally grown cloth made from pineapple or abaca fibers) as material, it is said that using either causes rashes or skin irritation because of the material's fibers. Thus, it has been thought wise and practical to tuck the baro out. Besides, the country's tropical climate favors clothes that are tucked out, just as in other nations in the Orient, the male's garments are long, loose and tucked out. Also, since the Philippines had commercial contacts with some countries in the East such as China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, etc., where the men wore long, tucked out attires, then somehow the baro worn tucked out must have been influenced. Grandmothers' stories, on the other hand, disclose that the baro hangs loose over trousers because these baro were "hand-me-downs" from the Spaniards and other foreign masters. Since the Filipinos were shorter and smaller in build, the baro appeared loose and was tucked out since belts or the practice of tucking it in was not part of the sartorial tradition of the natives then. It was also customary during those times that in households where Filipinos proved to be more than househelps, used but still wearable clothes of the masters of the house were generously and affectionately given.

Nineteenth Century Baro Modification to the baro quickened in the 19th century as the natives brushed elbows with the Europeans more frequently and around 1859, the baro acquired the romantic look. It was embroidered all over whereas embroidery had previously been confined to the chest alone. In addition, it was buttoned on the chest, had a smaller collar and bold curls. Later the collar became ruffled and then plain. Incidentally, the neckerchief was no longer worn. But this time the baro was worn tucked under a European topcoat by the *mestizos* (half-foreigners or of mixed ancestry although at that time, *mestizos* alone referred to Spanish Filipinos) who had opportunities to travel and to catch not only the rapid fires of liberalism and freedom that were sweeping Europe at this time but also the trends and fads of fashion. The ordinary folk, on the other hand, wore their everyday dress as they had done for a hundred years: loose shirts of coarse *quimara* cloth, often blue or blue-and-white-striped, and worn over trousers. An added flair was a kerchief flung over the shoulder and worn as a *putong* on the head. And for special occasions, a black high hat was considered smart. From the mid-19th century there were more uniformity and restraint in men's wear. The cravat had gone out of fashion. The baro had a neat, tailored collar upon which a narrow black cravat was worn at formal functions and the buttons on the cuffs disappeared. At times, the men wore their baro *cerrada* or close-necked. And the trousers? They remained long and narrow.

The Barong Tagalog By the time the Filipino nationalists had won their fight for independence, the baro ng Tagalog, or Barong Tagalog as it was popularly called from then on, with ruffled collar and cuffs and more elaborate designs, reappeared. Presumably, it was called Barong Tagalog since it was first worn among the people of Luzon who were called "Tagalogs", as differentiated from the "Bisaya" or Visayans who stayed in the Visayan provinces. This type of baro was in use till 1920. Worn without the chaqueta, the Barong Tagalog acquired a fresh look with its rainbow of colors and motley of design as in stripes of all sizes, tiny checks and flower patterns. There were also the two-colored Barong Tagalog with the square embroidered design n front, similar to the front designs of European dress shirts. The material was made of jusi and sinamay. This was the time, significantly, when the Barong Tagalog had begun to interpret itself as an independent costume. The mestizos, to underscore their wealth, wore the baro with imported black leather pointed shoes and bowler hat. Then, like the first breath of spring, emerged what was considered "the most authentic" **Barong Tagalog**. Made of rengue abaca fiber, it was worn over camisa de chino (a Chinese collarless, T-shirt) and sported a design on the half-open chest (this design was called pechera from the Spanish word "pecho" meaning "chest"). With plain collar, and pleated backs, it was the vogue till 1930. This was of course popular only with the well-heeled Filipinos. The farmers, cocheros, zacateros or vendors had their collarless long-sleeved camisa de chino made of sinamay as their answer to this attractive, distinguish-looking Barong Tagalog. These came in all their festive glory: cream, aquamarine, pink, pastel orange with floral embroidery. Generally, the indio donned the camisa de chino over loose salawals or pants that could easily be folded for work. He went barefoot but at times wore pointed slippers. Sometimes these camisa de chinos sported a pocket either outside or inside. It has also been said that Filipino men of the ilustrado class wore this camisa de chino for their everyday, casual wear and the "authentic Barong Tagalog" of loose cut, and pechera hand embroidery at formal, ceremonial functions.

The Commonwealth Baro. After the inauguration of the Philippine Commonwealth on November 15, 1935 under the tutelage of President Manuel L. Quezon, a variation of the Barong Tagalog, known as the "Commonwealth Barong Tagalog" or the Barong Tagalog with the Tydings Mc Duffie motif became popular. It was so-called because it featured the Philippine Commonwealth flag with the red, white and blue stripes, alongside the American flag. These two flags were crisscrossed in the design that was all over the fabric. It will be recalled that during this period, Filipinos were bent on gaining political independence and this was dramatized by their nationalistic spirit. In terms of clothing, goods, language, music, among other manifestations of this patriotic sentiment, Filipinos tried to prove that the time for self-realization and political autonomy had come. True enough, the Philippines was bound to secure its independence as a nation. But other factors had to intervene. the holocaust of the Second World War which broke out on December 8, 1941 was a major catastrophe that had to be resolved. Filipinos fought hand in hand with their allied friends - the Americans. And so when the ashes of the war had been swept away, Filipinos picked up anew the pieces of their dream of political independence. This was realized on July 4, 1946. Against this backdrop of renewed faith in the Philippines and in Filipinos, the Barong Tagalog greeted the fashion scene with some alterations. Shorter this time, it carried an inner pocket on the left side and colorful designs of Philippine scenes and games became common embellishments.

The Post-war Baro. But American hold on the Philippines and Filipinos grew tighter as in a noose and many Filipinos, steeped in colonial mentality, took to wearing American outfits. The Philippine Commonwealth and Republic Presidents - from Presidents Manuel Luis Quezon to Manuel Roxas to Elpidio Quirino - paraded their white sharkskin suits, coats with vests and tuxedos at official functions. There were some occasions though when these leaders of the country wore the Barong Tagalog as some photos confirm. But even President Quirino, who had been sporting the Barong Tagalog from the Tesoro's shop in the early 50s, had not really pushed the attire to its national recognition.

New Clothing Behavior with Ramon Magsaysay. The baro gained hope when the "man of the masses," President Ramon Magsaysay (1955-1957), chose to wear the Barong Tagalog in all official and personal affairs. To the "Poor Guy" was attributed the signal honor of using the Barong Tagalog during his inauguration and during his brief term, made it fashionable as business and formal wear. The baro acquired, so to speak, its first post-war nationalistic medal. Since then, it began to be worn at formal occasions and thus, stood side by side with national attires of other countries. In the 1950s some innovations on the baro were once again introduced. For instance, flower-embroidered designs proved popular. Designs on the Barong Tagalog in the late fifties were geometric -

circles, squares or diamonds with dainty flowers in between.

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The Polo Barong. After a decade or so, it became customary for bridegrooms to wear the long-sleeved, pechera-embroidered Barong Tagalog. Alongside this trend, the baro turned informal with the introduction of the short-sleeved variety (made of cotton, Philippine ramle and later, in the seventies, of chiffonille) called "polo Barong", the baro turned informal. The polo Barong was so well received that it soon became the unofficial uniform of Filipinos who work, study and play. In other words, this shorter version became the all-around wear of Filipinos. It has been said that the polo Barong may as well be the present generation's answer to yesteryears' camisa de chino. Slowly but surely' this overwhelming acceptance of the polo Barong would peak in the eighties. By the end of the sixties and with President Ferdinand E. Marcos at the helm, the fate of the baro was now written in the stars. At the Batac Museum in Ilocos Norte, opened on September 11, 1977, the ex-President's admirable array of Barong Tagalog is exhibited. It proudly shows then Congressman Marcos' camisa de chino with its floral design. It was his first Barong Tagalog (1949) which focused on the spirit of balik-barangay, the spirit of the countryside, the spirit of the common Filipino. Together with this humble native shirt are the President's prototype of the Barong Filipino, as well as other forms of the now popular Marcos-styled Barong Tagalog (from the all-over embroidered Barong Tagalog to the geometric to the floral to the pechera-embroidered Filipino wear). Following as it were the country's national leader, the Filipinos took to wearing the Barong Tagalog with such distinguishing acceptance that it was now the role of the baro to unite and inspire, other people. Indeed, it would not take long for the Barong Tagalog to be confident of its lofty status and be ready for some other glitter.