

Mina Roces argues that there was an inherent tension between Western dress and Filipino dress throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The contrast between these two types of dress came to represent opposing identities, though their associations with particular categories were not always static or predictable. Even in the gendering of costume, women were not necessarily always the 'bearers of tradition'. Women's dress however, continued to be the Other of men's dress.

# Gender, nation and the politics of dress in 20th century Philippines

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The iconography of the People Power 1 Revolution in 1986 was dominated by the images of two powerful women: First Lady Imelda Marcos, resplendent in her *terno* (national dress with butterfly sleeves), and opposition presidential candidate Corazon Aquino, the widow in yellow. The contrast between the elegant First Lady in the national dress she had popularised and the housewife in yellow dresses problematised the tension between Western dress and national dress. The visual categories of Western dress/Filipino dress did not always naturally correspond to not-nationalist/Nationalist, powerful/disempowered, modern/traditional, or even other/self. Whether Western dress and Filipino dress represented the modern nation shifted constantly in different historical periods. Western dress and Filipino dress took on different meanings and different valences that shifted over time. In the American colonial period, for example, Western suits represented the modern nation-to-be while Filipino dress was associated with the colonised subject. After independence, Filipino dress for men in the 1950s began to symbolise the Filipino 'man of the masses'. But in the martial law years, President Marcos and his First Lady Imelda Marcos popularised the two prominent types of national dress, the *Barong Tagalog* for men and the *terno* for women. Fifteen years later the people who demanded Marcos's resignation rejected the Filipino dress associated with the First Family and expressed their opposition to the Marcos Other with a yellow T-shirt.

Filipino dress for this particular study will refer to the *Barong Tagalog* for the male (see photo) and the *terno* for the women. These are the native clothes most popularly used by politicians and most recognised internationally as 'Filipino dress'.

## The politics of dress in the American colonial period

The campaign for Philippine independence during the American colonial period raised different issues for men and women. For Filipino men, supporting the nationalist project meant advocating immediate independence from America and working towards that goal. For Filipino women, supporting the nationalist project meant lobbying for a government that would disenfranchise them as women (since most Filipino men were against women's suffrage, which was not won until 1937). This difference in women's and men's positioning in the composition of the future independent nation-state was reflected in dress. The modern Filipino man became synonymous with the *Sajonista* (pro-American): the English-speaking, university educated, professional politician. This modern Filipino was attired in an *Americana* (the Filipino term for a Western suit, jacket and trousers, American style). Wives of politicians, on the other hand, always wore the *terno* and the *pañuelo* (pichu, this disappears after the 1950s) when accompanying their husbands to official functions and duties. In the American colonial period then, men in Western suits represented political power and modernity. Women in *terno* and *pañuelo*, however, represented the disenfranchised, disempowered non-citizen. In wearing the *Americana*, Filipino male politicians disassociated themselves from the colonised by claiming to be among the powerful, while women wore the attire of the colonised subject.

The fact that suffragists and wives of politicians wore the *terno* and the *pañuelo* did not necessarily mean, however, that these women wholly accepted and internalised male representations of them. Suffragists (most of whom were involved in one way or another in women's education) argued that the 19<sup>th</sup> century Filipino dress was impractical for daily wear; for example, as uniforms for high school or university or in the workplace.<sup>1</sup> And yet, while advocating Western dress for the new modern woman, suffragists deliberately wore the *terno* and *pañuelo* to all official occasions and often to work. Why? The suffragists were considered to be the 'modern' Americanised women of the time: English-speaking, university educated, professional women and clubwomen (the National Federation of Women's Clubs led the suffrage campaign). They were among the first women university graduates (women being allowed into universities in 1908). These women demanded profound changes, including the reform of the Spanish Civil Code, a move more radical than just demanding the vote. However, in a period when most Filipino men, including the majority of delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1934, were against it, the campaign for the vote was revolutionary. The use of national dress to 'repackage' the modern Filipino woman in a traditional women's narrative played on the male

Painting of Imelda Marcos by artist Claudio Bravo. Photograph from Carmen Pedrosa, *The Rise and Fall of Imelda Marcos* (Manila: np, 1987)





nostalgia for a romanticised 'Filipina woman'. Popular culture echoed this nostalgia for the 'Filipina' who was shy, timid, beautiful and obedient. One of National Artist Fernando Amorsolo's favourite subjects for his paintings in the 1920s and 1930s (and even beyond) was rural scenes featuring this *dalagang Pilipina* (Filipino maiden) dressed in traditional *balintawak* or *kimona*, shy, smiling, timid, posed against the backdrop of a never changing romantic rural landscape. By the 1920s this 'Filipina woman' was disappearing.<sup>2</sup> Amorsolo's biographer Alfredo Rocas argued that Amorsolo's paintings, which were in the genre of the tourist's vision of the Philippines, represented the Filipino's nostalgia for a rural countryside that remained untouched and romantic.<sup>3</sup> Amorsolo's paintings essentialised in visual art the image of the Filipino woman most Filipino men wanted to preserve. As the country experienced vast changes, some became sentimental for the imagined 'unchanging' countryside peopled by beautiful women in national dress winnowing rice or carrying water jars. In the midst of change, women were still imagined as 'traditional' (see photo).

### President Magsaysay and the *Barong Tagalog*

The Philippines was proclaimed an independent Republic on 4 July 1946. Since the American regime, Western-style suits or the *Americana* (or coat and tie) had been the only accepted dress for male formal wear and Philippine presidents from Manuel Roxas to President Elpidio Quirino wore Western-style formal attire for their presidential inauguration ceremonies. In 1953, however, Ramon Magsaysay won with a campaign that focused on his self-representation as 'the man of the masses'.<sup>4</sup> Magsaysay hoped to contrast his simple, poor boy image with the previous administration's excess and corruption. His dress at the inauguration declared his dramatic break with the past - he wore the *Barong Tagalog* which until then had not been elevated to formal attire. The theme of 'simplicity' coincided with Magsaysay's message that he was just like the ordinary folk. Dress and consumption patterns deliberately distinguished the new president from the elites with Western tastes. *The Philippines Free Press* reported that Magsaysay had chosen to break with tradition by dispensing with the inauguration ball, substituting it for a luncheon (not exclusive to the elite) with a native menu (described as 'simple') of *sinigang na hipon* (soup with tamarind base and prawns), *lumpia* (spring rolls) and *basi* (Ilocano wine).<sup>5</sup> But the vestimentary and consumption practices of this new president were not so much an attempt to privilege the Filipino over the West, as more specifically, to extol the *masa* or Filipino masses over the Filipino elite. Since the Filipino elite wore Western dress and had Western consumption patterns (after all, prior to 1946, Filipino elites were trying to show they were equal to the West), Magsaysay deliberately chose to represent the common *tao* and not the wealthy elite class.

### The Marcos years

When Ferdinand Marcos became president for the first time in 1965, it was his wife First Lady Imelda Romualdez Marcos who graced the cover of *Life Magazine*, wearing a *terno*. The former Rose of Tacloban and Miss Manila was a raven-haired beauty who according to couturier J. Moreno "carried the *terno* very well".<sup>6</sup> The *terno* was her signature attire from the time of the campaign for the presidency - ("she wore *ternos* even for appearances on small, rickety, makeshift stages of rough wooden planks covered with *nipa* leaves") - to the last Philippine national television coverage of Marcos's 1986 inauguration immediately before the First Family boarded the helicopter that took them to exile in the USA.<sup>7</sup>

President Ferdinand Marcos also chose to popularise Filipino attire and the wearing of the *Barong Tagalog*. Although President Ramon Magsaysay was the first president to wear the garment at a presidential inauguration ceremony and to elevate the humble *Barong Tagalog* to formal wear, President Marcos wore it on all occasions (it was rare to find a picture of him wearing anything else). In 1971 Pierre Cardin redesigned the *Barong Tagalog* by slashing open the front (before that it had to go over the head), removing the cuffs that required cuff links, flaring the sleeves and minimising the embroidery.<sup>8</sup> Popularly nicknamed the 'Pierre Cardin *Barong Tagalog*' it was also tapered to the body, and this represented a radical move from the traditional loose-fitting garment.<sup>9</sup> This style was worn until the 1980s. Marcos favoured the shirtjacket style of *Barong Tagalog* in geometric designs.<sup>10</sup>

When, after the Marcos regime fell, Imelda Marcos was compelled to face trial in New York City, she appeared in court (despite the New York weather) in a *terno*, using it to send the message that the United States was persecuting the country:

*"When I got indicted, I did not shout at the Americans for the injustice heaped upon me. I made a statement by wearing a terno, to say I am a Filipino. I could not wear the flag, so I used the terno, to make my statement".<sup>11</sup>*

In her interpretation, the *terno* was the flag and by wearing it she embodied the Philippine nation, victimised by the powerful West. But this self-representation was not endorsed by local audiences, and after 1986 was repudiated by international audiences as well. If clothing is one form of 'text', several meanings can be attributed to it, often meanings different from the wearer's agenda. Politicians may imbue particular attire with meaning, but the public, viewing that ensemble of clothing and accoutrements, interpret 'the text' from their own ideological positions. Despite Imelda's attempts to identify herself with the 'national imaginary' by wearing the *terno*, audiences associated the *terno* with her personality, giving her names such as 'the iron butterfly' (referring to the *terno*'s butterfly sleeves and her toughness). By the 1980s, the *terno* was a metonymy for Imelda Marcos rather than metaphor for the nation.

The martial law years (September 1972 to February 1986) transformed the *Barong Tagalog* from costume to attire. In 1975 President Marcos issued a decree proclaiming *Barong Tagalog* Week (5-11 June) and designated the *Barong Tagalog* as the national attire. An

informal short-sleeved version of the *Barong Tagalog* known as the Polo Barong, became an 'all round' shirt.<sup>12</sup> Government employees began to wear this new informal variant in cotton or polyester, short sleeves, open in front, with minimal geometric designs in the centre. In the 1970s, private companies began to prescribe the Polo Barong as their uniform - sometimes with the company's initials or logo in the top front.<sup>13</sup>

Western dress became the choice for revolutionary clothing in the events that led to the People Power Revolution of 1986. The ubiquitous yellow T-shirt became the visible symbol of the anti-Marcos opposition.

### After Marcos

Of marked significance is the shift from women as 'bearers of nation' in the American colonial period to men as 'bearers of nation' since the 1970s. The *Barong Tagalog* is ubiquitous in the Philippines, and most Filipinos own several types. On the other hand, the *terno* has been relegated to costume for special occasions that require Filipiniana dress. The fact that the Philippines is now an independent country with a self-conscious identity means that men can now proudly wear a *Barong Tagalog* and feel on equal footing with the leaders of the modern nations of the world. When President George W. Bush visited the Philippines in October 2003, he was expected to wear a *Barong Tagalog* at the formal dinner.<sup>14</sup>

Now that Filipino dress has acquired political status and national identity, men have become proud 'bearers of national tradition'. But why this reversal? Why are women no longer 'bearers of tradition', preferring instead to wear Western attire particularly in the higher echelons of power? When President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo took her oath of office in 2001 she wore a Western suit. This was not simply a matter of rejecting the *terno*, which was so closely associated with Mrs Marcos. The choice of a suit was crucial because President Arroyo wanted to present herself as 'GMA', the efficient professional woman with a doctorate in economics. President Arroyo chose Western dress over Filipino dress because she wanted to represent all that was considered efficient and professional - in contrast to the ineptitude and inefficiency of her predecessor President Joseph Estrada. Western dress was more compatible with a no-nonsense image. Women needed to wear Western dress because they still had to be taken seriously as powerful contenders in the power game. While men could already bask in their political power, women, marginalised in official circles (in 2004 they still only made up 11 percent of politicians) needed to show that they were qualified, efficient, educated, modern and professional. In this case, Western dress delivered that message of professionalism much more than national dress.

Because the history of the post-independence Philippines is fraught with corruption and kinship politics, politicians are keen to represent themselves as Filipino heroes who will save the country from deterioration and chaos. The wearing of national dress demonstrates a visible attempt to make that claim. Hence, the fact that men rather than women are the bearers and wearers of 'nation' further marginalises women from becoming national icons. Precisely because dress can express a multitude of codes, the battle over 'national dress' or Filipino dress becomes more than a struggle to alter appearances.

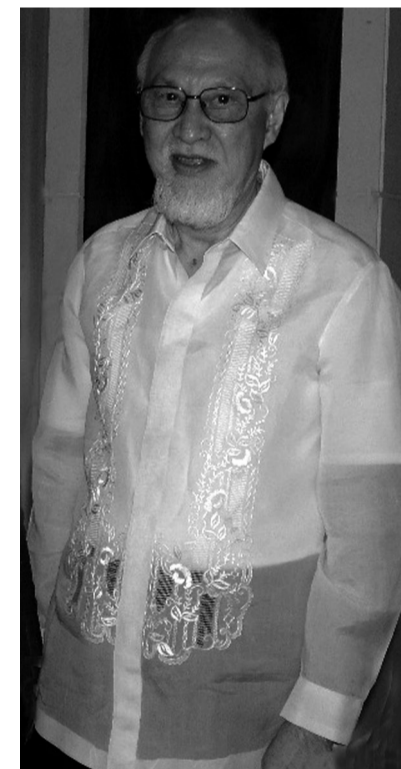
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Amorsolo painting 1930. From the private collection of Mr. and Mrs. Alfredo Rocas



*Barong Tagalog*. Filipino dress for men.