

History of Barong Tagalog

BARONG TAGALOG

There's really something about the Barong Tagalog that appeals to unassuming, low-key personalities with a penchant for subtle elegance. Needless to say, the Barong Tagalog not only boasts of a rich, ancient craft. It speaks volumes of a heritage that spanned decades of multi-cultural influences and raw patriotism. This is probably why it is naturally worn with pride and dignity. For whenever you don a barong tagalog, you are not just carrying a style, you are wearing a legacy. Here are snippets of little known facts about the Barong Tagalog...how it has come to be the Philippine National Costume and how it evolved from the simple Baro to the elaborate handicraft that it is now:

- Before the Spaniards' discovery of Philippines, the Tagalogs of Luzon wore baro – a sleeveless doublet of rough cotton extending slightly below the waist. It is collarless and opens in the front. It is worn with a piece of cotton cloth covering the men's loins and extending to mid thigh.
- During the 18th century, the handkerchief - usually made of colored silk and inspired with European cravat - was introduced as an accessory to the baro. And while it was a more popular belief that barongs were worn loose and not tucked in because it looked better, the real reason was to show off the hand woven embroidery and sheer fabric for everyone to admire.
- The Spaniards introduced the dressy standing collar shirt to the baro and allowed only the Ilustrados – the rich and landed Filipino families- to wear them with shoes and hats. However, they were not allowed to tuck in their baro under their waistbands nor were they allowed to have any pockets. It was meant to remind them that they remain an Indio regardless of the wealth and power they attain. It was clearly intended to discriminate the natives from the Spanish rulers. It was also believed that transparent, sheer fabric were used for the Barong Tagalog mainly to discourage the Indios from hiding any weapons in their shirts.
- Hand-woven embroidery on the chest of the baro was a European influence in the 19th century. Later on, the collar was modified to become ruffled and the baro started to be worn tucked under a European topcoat mostly by mestizos or Spanish Filipinos. The ordinary Filipino still wore their baro loose and over trousers. They also started wearing putong on the head and a kerchief over the shoulders. A high black hat may sometimes be worn on special occasions.
- From the mid 19th century, the baro were being worn closed-neck and without the cravat. In its place, they had the collar tailored into a narrow black cravat with the buttons on the cuffs removed. Although they succumb to the restrictions on wearing the barong Tagalog, the Ilustrados started expressing subtle rebellious emotions through elaborate embroidery designs on their Barong Tagalog.
- Different Barong Tagalog styles emerged after the Filipino Nationalists gained independence. The designs were more detailed and the collars and cuffs were ruffled. This type of Barong tagalog was popular until the 1920s.

- The use of the barong Tagalog to express individual style began to be popular and it took several shapes from varied interpretations. The Mestizos wore their Barong tagalog with imported black leather shoes and a bowler hat. The Ilustrados wore their rengue abaca-made barong with plain collar and half-open chest and pleated back design. It was worn over a Chinese collarless shirt called camisa de chino for formal functions. The ordinary men or the Indios, however, continued to wear festive colored camisa de chinos over loose pants and pointed slippers. The loose pants doubled as working pants as it could be easily folded for farm work.
- The popularly known Commonwealth Barong tagalog designed with the Commonwealth and American flag, was worn by President Manuel L. Quezon during his November 15, 1935 inauguration. However, President Quezon was seen more often wearing coats, shirts, and vests, in most social functions and did not really push to promote the barong Tagalog.
- Recovering from the disaster brought about by World War II, the Filipinos tried to rebuild their political independence and to create an identity as a nation. They started modifying the Barong tagalog by adding an inner pocket on the left side and making the length shorter. They also began doing colorful Barong tagalog designs depicting Philippine scenes and games to instill patriotism.
- In the 1950's, flower embroidery designs in circles and diamond squares with dainty flowers in between began appearing in most Barong Tagalogs.
- During the American era, Filipinos began wearing more of the American dresses and less of the Barong Tagalog. It was only during President Ramon Magsaysay's time from 1955-1957 did the barong tagalog's popularity re-surfaced as the president himself chose to wear them during his inauguration and in all other social functions, thereafter.
- From 1961-1964, during President Diosdado Macapagal's term, the Barong Tagalog with all-over embroidery became a staple men's wear on formal affairs.
- In 1975, President Ferdinand E. Marcos proclaimed the Barong Tagalog as the National Attire and announced June 5-11 as Barong Tagalog week. Being a vocal advocate of the Barong Tagalog, he would showcase his collection of barong from the time he was a congressman, up to his popular 1949 Barong Tagalog which depicted in its design the spirit of the countryside and the common Filipino. The all-over embroidery designed Barong Tagalog became synonymous with the Marcos fashion style.
- During the 1990's, it was President Fidel V. Ramos who somewhat injected an informal twist to the Barong Tagalog by wearing them with folded long sleeves. Later on, former President Joseph Estrada would follow suit and be oftentimes seen with folded long sleeved Barong Tagalog. But to their credit, the two presidents wore finely embroidered Barong Tagalog with the required elegance during formal occasions.
- The barong Tagalog further evolved and a new trend depicting the baro as a semi-formal wear with short sleeves began to be popular in the last 10 years. With the use of cotton, ramie, or chiffonile, the birth of the new era "Polo Barong" gave way to the unofficial work attire of the working Filipino.

Several other modifications on the Barong Tagalog were seen through the years. As a result of the different cultural influences that were rubbed on to us by the Chinese, the Europeans, the Indians, and the Americans, we now have a variety of Barong Tagalog designs to choose from. The collars may come in Chinese, Mandarin, Nehru,

or Traditional style. The cuffs may be French, one-button or convertible. The design may be floral, geometric, or a combination of both. But the old-world charm that comes in every Barong Tagalog remains the same. Its elegance in all its simplicity is enchanting and mysterious in its subtleness. Most will say that you need a certain attitude to wear your Barong Tagalog well. I think that attitude would have to be pride and love for country.

HOW PINA FABRIC IS MADE

Ever wondered what makes the pina fabric so expensive? Here's an eye-opener on how much tedious work comes with every meter of this elegant craft.

- The Spanish Red or Native Philippine Red, the kind that has leaves spanning an average of 2 meters in length, takes about one and a half years to mature. As soon as the fruit is just about ripe, the leaves are likewise ready for harvesting.
- The leaves are snapped off the plant with a sharp tug on the tip and the thorny edges are pulled off.
- During extraction, which could be as long as three days, the workers squat on a long board where the leaves are placed. The leaves are then scraped using a broken china plate. (Some suggest the use of antique porcelain to be the best) This is done by folding over a few inches of the leaf base and striking it with the heel of the hands to reveal the first set of fibres called bastos or coarse fibres. These are extracted and set aside.
- The leaf is then scraped once more with a coconut shell to bring out a finer fibre called the linawan. This, too, is extracted and set aside.
- An average pineapple leaf could produce 75% of the coarse or Bastos fibre and 25% of the finer linawan fibre.
- Bastos was used for the cascading, curly hair of images and saints displayed in Philippine churches, and some are used for paper and twine making. The rest of the waste is used as feeds for pigs.
- When the extractors come to scrape a quantity of about 1,000 leaves, the bundles of fibres are washed, usually at a nearby stream. It is scraped again gently with the use of a seashell to remove remaining unwanted impurities making the strands whiter in appearance.
- The strands are then partially sun-dried on the grass and beaten with a bamboo stick to separate the fibres.
- It is then hung on a line to dry, combed and tied upside-down to a slim bamboo pole for knotting.
- The ends are cut off with a sharp piece of bamboo and the threads are coiled around a clay pot. The pot is placed with sand to prevent tangles. The fibres are then taken to traders for weighing.
- A loom made of coco lumber with bamboo foot treadles are used to weave the fabric. The thread is coiled on cylindrical frames and the thread for weft is wound on bobbins made out of small pieces of bamboo.
- The average production of a weaver is about half a meter/day. The process is painstakingly slow and broken threads need constant knotting.

- After weaving, the off-white colored cloth with a rather smoky smell is washed with rice water or citrus juice.
- The cloth is then sent out for embroidery.

To sum up, the whole process from leaf plucking to the finished woven cloth, would take about four months of continuous work to produce only about 20 meters of the precious fabric. That's why several attempts have been made to develop a machine that would do the work but the thread being so fine and prone to breaking made this impossible.

STEPS IN BARONG TAGALOG EMBROIDERY

Much as the pina fabric is tediously woven for that elegant texture, the embroidery is done with an equally delicate and painstaking process. The old-world craft has been handed down from generation to generation and have evolved to adapt to the times. However, the innate skill remains intact and the subtle elegance is preserved.

- First, embroidery pattern is chalked on the cloth
- The cloth is stretched using a round or rectangular frame called bastador.
- With the cloth ready for embroidery, they proceed with using a variety of thread from white or colored, cotton, silk, or pina.
- After embroidery is done, they are lightly stretched between two rectangular frames and cleaned from the underside using a washcloth and detergent.
- After drying, the cloth is ironed before delivery to contractors.

DESIGN INFLUENCES ON THE BARONG TAGALOG

The mid 19th century saw a change in the Barong Tagalog embroidery - from designs concentrated on the torso or pechera, to all-over embroidery (front, back, sleeves)

- European influence on the Barong Tagalog design was apparent in floral patterns and stylized plants, leaves and stems on two-colored cloths of tiny checks and squares.
- American influence saw the Barong Tagalog embroidered with pilgrim scenarios, young rugged boys, and American Indian motifs
- Pre-war and post-war embroidery for barong Tagalog came in rainbow colors simulating Philippine sceneries as that of the bayanihan, the bahay kubo or nipa

hut, the carabao ploughing rice fields, cultural items such as the Philippine rooster, flowers and other animals, dances such as the Tinikling and Pandango sa Ilaw, and folk games like taguan and tumbang preso. Geometric shapes



combined with other motifs were also used during this period.

- In the sixties, full callado designs done mostly on jusi and pina was popular during President Diosdado Macapagal's time. The style continued its popularity with President Ferdinand Marcos taken to using the same in most social functions.
- The seventies saw the same embroidery designs on the Barong Tagalog. But the advent of the polo barong being worn as the working uniform in the latter years made for simpler embroidery design confined mostly to the pechera or two parallel lines of rectangular frames in the front.
- At present, more and more of the working

Filipino class opt for the embroidery-less, short sleeved Polo Barong for its casual look. However, the elaborately designed Barong Tagalog is still widely used for weddings and special occasions.

What is it? Is Barong the same as Barong Tagalog?

Barong Tagalog is properly referred to as the *Baro ng Tagalog* (dress of the Tagalog) and it cannot be contacted 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. Barong Tagalog can be worn at formal and informal occasions, for day and evening wear, for business and at leisure.

Barong Tagalog Care Tips:

- Do not dry clean it. It contains chemicals that may make the Barong Tagalog brittle and therefore shorten its life span.
- Using washing machine for Barong Tagalog is a crime.

Hand washing is still the best way to clean the barong. When washing Barong Tagalog made of Jusi or Pina, one mixes a calculated amount of detergent with water and mixes it thoroughly until the detergent is completely dissolved in the basin. Then soak the Barong Tagalog on one whole day or do it overnight. After this step, use a soft brittle toothbrush with a tiny amount of detergent to brush off the stubborn dirt on the Barong Tagalog especially on collar, underneath the cuffs, arm holes, etc. and then rinses it with an upward and downward motion on water. However, hand-embroidered Barong Tagalog should not be scrubbed. A cardinal rule when one rinses the Barong Tagalog, one does not squeeze nor twist the fabric. Drip it dry by laying it flat so it will not create too much crease. The less sunlight for the Barong Tagalog ,

the better to avoid discoloration. One must iron the Barong Tagalog while it is still damp in a moderate heat to retain its original shape.

How it started...

- Before the Spaniards discovered the Philippines, the Tagalogs who lived in the island of Luzon, wore baro. The Tagalog males wore a sleeveless-doublet of rough cotton cloth, extending slightly below the waist, collarless and with the opening in front. The doublet was either red (for the chiefs and brave men), black, blue or white (for ordinary citizens). Their loins were covered with *bahague* which hung between the legs to mid-thigh. The women wore the same color as the men with a sleeve dress clothing but a little bit shorter than the men's. The Visayans of the Visayan islands, wore a long, collarless robe or jacket reaching to the feet, and embroidered in colors. It was fine, rich and gay in style. The Tagalog and Visayan men covered their forehead and temples with long, narrow strips of cloth. The men's baro was loose with wide sleeves and without cuffs. The chiefs and others wore a long black baro reaching to their feet with sleeves fitted on the wrist for their church and special functions.
- After 18th century, the baro was shortened and the collar was replaced with a short one. The matching pants were also changed to a tight fitting along with big military stripes. The handkerchief was introduced in this period that goes with the attire usually made of colored silk and inspired with European cravat. The popular belief why the Barong Tagalog was not tucked in because it looks better if it is not tucked. The real reason why it needs to be not tucked is the baro with a loose style, hand woven embroidery and sheer fabric is to show off and be admired.
- After the Spaniards came, they brought in their dressy standing collar shirt. They taught the natives to wear shoes and hats but only the rich natives with Spanish connections could do so. The ilustrados (male members of the families who owned landed estates or who invested with some Spanish authority in the community) were not allowed to tuck their baro under their waistband or have any pockets. It was meant to humiliate the "Indios" in spite of their wealth or power as a constant reminder, they remained natives. Or they were easily identified from their Spanish rulers.
- Around 19th century, the baro was modified as the natives brushed elbows with the Europeans. The baro captured the romantic look because it was embroidered all over. Before, the embroidery was hand woven on the chest alone. And later, the collar became ruffled and plain. And the baro was worn tucked under a European topcoat by the mestizos (Spanish Filipinos). The Indios or ordinary Filipino people, on the other hand, wore their ordinary loose shirts, made of coarse *quimara* cloth with blue or blue-and-white-striped, and worn over trousers. An added accessory were the *putong* on the head and the kerchief over the shoulder. A black high hat on special occasion was considered stylish.
- From the mid 19th century, the baro were more uniformity and reserve in men's wear. On special events, they wore their baro closed-neck and they no longer use cravat instead, they had the collar tailored into a neatly narrow black cravat and the buttons on the cuffs removed. The trousers still remained long and narrow.

- After the Filipino Nationalists won their fight for independence, the Barong Tagalog or Barong Tagalog reappeared. It was designed with more details as in stripes of all sizes, tiny checks, and flower patterns. Also with ruffled collar and cuffs. It was labeled Barong Tagalog since it was first worn by the people of Luzon who they called themselves "Tagalogs", as they distinguished themselves from the Visayans (from the Visayan provinces). They use this kind of baro until 1920.
- There was a time, when the Barong Tagalog had begun to interpret itself as an independent attire. The Mestizos, wore the baro with imported black leather shoes and bowler hat. For the wealthy Filipinos or Ilustrados, they wore their Barong Tagalog made of rengue abaca fiber in a half-open chest, plain collar and pleated backs design, worn with camisa chino (Chinese collarless t-shirt) underneath for formal or special functions. As for the Indios, farmers or vendors, they wore a collarless long sleeves camisa de chino made of sinamay with festive colors like aquamarine, cream, pink, pastel orange with floral embroidery. They pair their camisa de chino over loose pants that could be easily folded for work with a pocket either inside or outside. The farmers used pointed slippers at times.
- The Barong Tagalog or commonly known as *Commonwealth Barong Tagalog*, that Manuel L. Quezon wore during his inauguration on November 15, 1935, (as the Philippine Commonwealth president) became popular because it showed the Philippine Commonwealth flag with the red, white and blue stripes alongside with the American flag. These two flags were all over the fabric. During this period, the Filipinos just gained their political independence as a nation.
- But another disaster strikes in 1941 of December 8th. A second world war was declared and the Filipinos fought hand in hand with the Americans. The war lasted until January 1946, and the Filipinos tried to build their political independence as a nation once again. To create their identity, the Filipinos modified their Barong Tagalog with inner pocket on the left side, shorter in length and added colorful designs of Philippine scenes and games.
- As the Americans hold on to the Philippines, the Filipinos acquired the colonial mentality by wearing the American outfit. To Philippine Commonwealth President, Manuel L. Quezon to Republic President, Elpidio Quirino, showed off their coats, shirts and vests at official functions. President Quirino did not push Barong Tagalog as the national attire.
- When President Ramon Magasaysay became president from 1955-1957, he chose to wear the Barong Tagalog during his inauguration, and to all his social functions. Since then, it began to be worn at formal occasions, and stood side by side with national attires of other countries. Around 1950's, Barong Tagalog were modified once again. They added flower embroidery designs in circles and squares of diamonds with dainty flowers in between. As the term of President Diosdado Macapagal from 1961-1964, the all-over embroidery on Barong Tagalog came back and became popular but only worn at formal affairs.
- But it was President Ferdinand E. Marcos promoted the Barong Tagalog and he issued a decree in 1975 proclaiming Barong Tagalog Week (June 5-11) as the national attire. There was a time during his term when he exhibited his array of Barong Tagalog – when he was a Congressman, he used camisa de chino with floral designs; His 1949 Barong Tagalog, which focused on spirit of countryside,

spirit of the common Filipino; And now popular Marcos-styled Barong Tagalog – the all-over embroidery.

- In the nineties, when Fidel V. Ramos became Philippines' President from 1992-1998, he wore his Barong Tagalog with folded long sleeves. Same thing with President Joseph Estrada, he would wear his Barong Tagalog with long sleeves folded. But in formal occasions, the former presidents (Ramos and Estrada) wore their Barong Tagalog with fine embroidery and elegance.
- After a period of ten years or so, a new trend came out in baro. The baro became informal with short sleeves design. The material was made of cotton, or ramie, or chiffonile. It is commonly known today as the "Polo Barong". The polo Barong became the unofficial uniform of Filipinos who work, play and study.
- With all these innovations and alterations on Barong Tagalog, Barong Tagalog became the ultimate Filipino in wear for formal and informal occasions. It is also trendy and casual, cozy and dignified all at once. It shows one's patriotism and part of the Filipino soul.

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