Mina Roces argues that there was an inherent tension between Western dress and Filipino dress throughout the 20th 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

Mina Roces

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 non-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 terno and barong for the men 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 American (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 pahile (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 pahile, however, represented the disenfranchised, disempowered non-citizen. In wearing the Americanised, 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 pahile 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 19th century Filipino dress was impractical for daily wear; for example, as uniforms for high school or university or in the workplace. ‘And yet, while advocating Western dress for the new modern woman, suffragists deliberately wore the terno and pahile 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 ‘repack-age’ the modern Filipino woman in a traditional women’s narrative played on the male
nastalgia 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 1930s and 1940s (and even beyond) was rural scenes featuring this ‘delightful’ Filipina (Filipino maiden) dressed in traditional balintawak or kimono, shy, smiling, timid, posed against the backdrop of a never changing romantic rural landscape. By the 1960s this ‘Filipina woman’ was disappearing.4 Amorsolo’s biographer Alfredo Roces argued that Amorsolo’s paintings, which were in the genre of the “na hipon” (soup with tamarind base and prawns), lumpia (spring rolls) and barong (frilled clothes)5 but the vestimentary and consumer habits of this new president were not so much an attempt to privilege the Filipina over the West, as more specifically, to extol the mass or Filipino masses over the Filipino elite. Since the Filipino elite wore Western dress and had Western consumption patterns (after all, prior to 1946, Filipinos were trying to show they were equal to the West), Magsaysay deliberately chose to represent the common too 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 grated 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 same voice very well.”6 The terno was her signature attire from the time of her campaign. In a 1937 interview with 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 singkang na hipon (soup with tamarind base and prawns), lumpia (spring rolls) and barong (frilled clothes). But the vestimentary and consumption practices of this new president were not so much an attempt to privilege the Filipina over the West, as more specifically, to extol the mass or Filipino masses over the Filipino elite. Since the Filipino elite wore Western dress and had Western consumption patterns (after all, prior to 1946, Filipinos were trying to show they were equal to the West), Magsaysay deliberately chose to represent the common too and not the wealthy elite class.

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 Ferdinand Marcos 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’4. Magsaysay hoped to contrast his simple, poor boy image with the previous administration’s excess and corruption.

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 that had previously represented the country. 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 singkang na hipon (soup with tamarind base and prawns), lumpia (spring rolls) and barong (frilled clothes). But the vestimentary and consumption habits of this new president were not so much an attempt to privilege the Filipina over the West, as more specifically, to extol the mass or Filipino masses over the Filipino elite. Since the Filipino elite wore Western dress and had Western consumption patterns (after all, prior to 1946, Filipinos were trying to show they were equal to the West), Magsaysay deliberately chose to represent the common too and not the wealthy elite class.

President Ferdinand Marcos also chose to popularise Filipina 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 1973, President Marcos re-designed the Barong Tagalog by slashing open the front before that it had to go over the head, removing the cuffs and the buttons that vectored the wearer’s attention to their skin and minimising the embroidery.7 Popularly nicknamed the ‘Pierre Cardin Barong Tagalog’, it was also tapered to the body, and thus represented a radical move from the traditional loose-fitting garment.8 This style was worn until the 1980s. Marcos favoured the shirtjacket style of Barong Tagalog, but this was rejected by international audiences as well. If the Marcos regime considered Western-style suits or the Americana acceptable dress for male formal wear and Philippine presidents from Manuel Roxas to Ferdinand Marcos 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’4. Magsaysay hoped to contrast his simple, poor boy image with the previous administration’s excess and corruption.

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 the Marcos regime considered Western-style suits or the Americana acceptable dress for male formal wear and Philippine presidents from Manuel Roxas to Ferdinand Marcos 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’4. Magsaysay hoped to contrast his simple, poor boy image with the previous administration’s excess and corruption.

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 the Marcos regime considered Western-style suits or the Americana acceptable dress for male formal wear and Philippine presidents from Manuel Roxas to Ferdinand Marcos 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’4. Magsaysay hoped to contrast his simple, poor boy image with the previous administration’s excess and corruption.

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 the Marcos regime considered Western-style suits or the Americana acceptable dress for male formal wear and Philippine presidents from Manuel Roxas to Ferdinand Marcos 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’4. Magsaysay hoped to contrast his simple, poor boy image with the previous administration’s excess and corruption.

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 the Marcos regime considered Western-style suits or the Americana acceptable dress for male formal wear and Philippine presidents from Manuel Roxas to Ferdinand Marcos 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’4. Magsaysay hoped to contrast his simple, poor boy image with the previous administration’s excess and corruption.

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 the Marcos regime considered Western-style suits or the Americana acceptable dress for male formal wear and Philippine presidents from Manuel Roxas to Ferdinand Marcos 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’4. Magsaysay hoped to contrast his simple, poor boy image with the previous administration’s excess and corruption.

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 the Marcos regime considered Western-style suits or the Americana acceptable dress for male formal wear and Philippine presidents from Manuel Roxas to Ferdinand Marcos 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’4. Magsaysay hoped to contrast his simple, poor boy image with the previous administration’s excess and corruption.

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 the Marcos regime considered Western-style suits or the Americana acceptable dress for male formal wear and Philippine presidents from Manuel Roxas to Ferdinand Marcos 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’4. Magsaysay hoped to contrast his simple, poor boy image with the previous administration’s excess and corruption.