

# “Maraming salamat po sa service”: Religion, Labor, and Dress from the Philippines to the Diaspora

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## Abstract

Traditional dress is often overlooked when it comes to contemporary fashion, which instead tends to focus on fast fashion production and consumption models. As a result, various forms of ethnic dress, like the *terno*, are labeled as “other” or “costume” and are placed outside of the dominant understanding of fashion, despite the continued use of these garments by these communities.

## Research Process

- Research and construct an understanding of how the *terno* came to be and how it existed in Philippine communities of the past.
- Collect online sources for content analysis.
  - Fifteen sources were used including blogs, newspapers, and magazines.

## What is the *terno*?

The *terno* is recognized by many for its high-arched and flat-sided sleeves, adopting the additional name of the ‘butterfly sleeve dress’. But the ‘butterfly sleeve dress’ and the *terno* are only two of its many names: it is also known as *Maria Clara*, or *Filipiniana*, or the *traje de mestiza*, the *baro’t saya*, to count a few. Although most of these terms technically refer to other distinct pieces, they are all recognized uniformly under a banner of dress that represents heritage. The term *Filipiniana* refers to a set of dances, songs, tales, books, stories, and dresses, each deemed an important piece of Filipinx heritage. However, its most frequent usage is in reference to traditional forms of dress, or more particularly a specific lineage of dress often traced through the *terno* back to pre-colonial Philippines.

## 2000s-Today



A *terno* inspired dress designed by Celeste Malvar-Stewart for her summer collection 2025.

## The *terno* and the Fil-Am Community Key Takeaways:

- **When can I be Filipino?** – The sense of othering that Filipinos feel being in the United States is reflected in how they divide their wardrobe into “Filipino” and “Normal” clothing.
- **Combatting Colonial Mentality** – Many Filipinx feel that they are tasked with unpacking the colonial legacies of the Spanish and American Empires and the *terno* is a primary vector through which that discourse occurs. How does one reckon with the extractive qualities of colonialism with the cultural practices that they find important.
- **Queering Womanhood** – Historically the *terno* was worn and utilized by elite *mestizas* and *indias* during the Spanish Colonial Era. Even after liberation, the tendency was to depict lighter toned Filipinas wearing the *terno* in popular media. However, many today are seeking to change that legacy, not only rejecting colorism, but also the Genderedness of the dress itself.

## 1850s-1900s



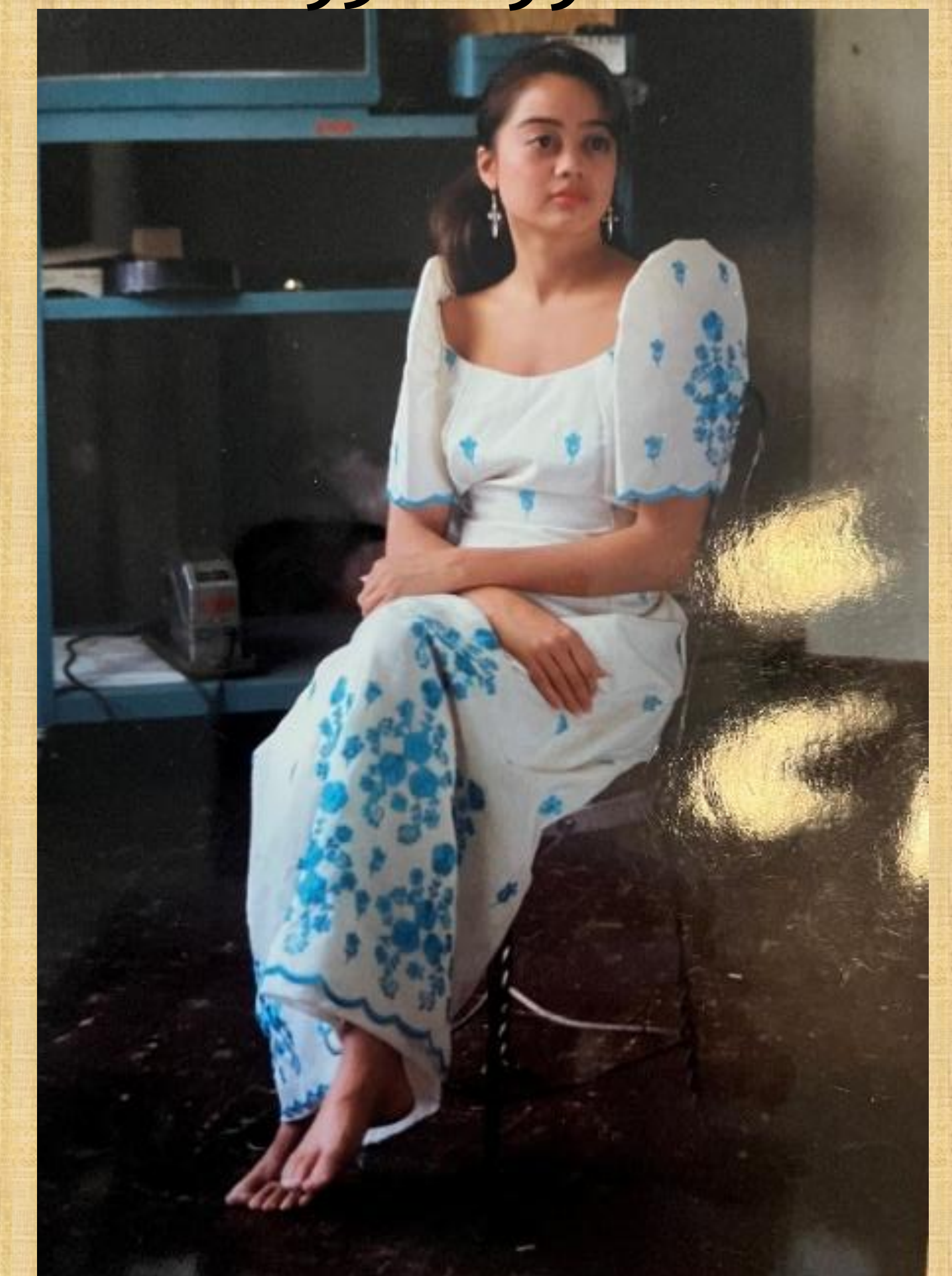
A picture of the *traje de mestiza* (without *tapis*), this ensemble was worn frequently worn in the mid-to-late 1800s.

## 1900s-1930s



Early *terno*/Maria Clara dress worn in the 1920s. Here top and bottom are matching, and the famous butterfly sleeves are beginning to form

## 1950s-1990s



A picture taken in the 1980s of my aunt wearing a more contemporary variation of the *terno* with starched and flattened sleeves.

- **Heritage as Resistance** – Whether it is through decolonial coalitions, charitable acts, or environmental sustainability, Filipinx are utilizing the *terno* as a vessel for their advocacy. By combining this significant piece of fashion with political activism they help foster a community focused on outreach and recognition.
- **Transnational Identity** – The *terno* often serves as a symbol of the Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW). The constant migration of labor going back and forth from the diaspora to the homeland creates a sense of connection that leads many designers in the U.S. to focus on protecting the local weaving communities in the Philippines.

## Conclusion

The *terno* continues to be a contested piece in the Filipinx consciousness. It symbolizes innovation amongst oppression, but at the same time, continues to bear some of those very same symbols of oppression. Nonetheless, those in the diaspora are seeking to resist that narrative as they continue to face the lingering effects of colonialism abroad. This is by no means the end of the conversation on the purpose of the *terno* in our contemporary lives, instead it invites even more questions on what decolonial resistance looks like for us moving forward.

## Remaining Questions

- What does it mean to have representation for indigenous communities?
- Is the *terno* truly separate from a capitalist/European fashion system?
- Can the relationship to clothing designers are trying to cultivate to the *terno* be applied to fashion universally?