

TATSULOK

Challenging the effects of American colonialism onto the Philippine society through fashion.

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00 | Summary

Tatsulok (triangle) questions and challenges the influences of the American colonizers in early 20th century Philippines. On the surface, the country was made to believe that the Americans were the saviors of the country from the Spanish oppression. What is underneath is the infiltration of American ideals into the Philippine politics, culture and economy that to this day have misplaced the nationalism of Filipinos emphasized by the separation of the social classes. This project looks into empowering a unified voice of Philippine nationalism against impact of colonialism through the powerful voice of fashion.

They are not white. Yet, before they could proudly claim it, the Philippine society pushed them to internalize that not being like an American puts them in a position of inferiority. Local television shows celebrate light skinned tall Filipinos or half-Filipinos who eloquently speak English. Advertisements of whitening products are encouraged for purchase promising viewers to look like them. White foreign tourists are treated more generously than darker skinned visitors. Families abroad are assumed more well-off than those left in the country. Moreover, English is a key to elevation. An English-speaking household gives the impression of a well-educated, Westernized, wealthy household. Wealthy families are mostly educated in American-based schools; middle class kids go to private schools. The rest of the Filipino people, as they work through the torturous heat of the sun tanning more profusely in hunger and pain, stay in silence afraid to exercise their own rights.

I wondered *why*.

Dr. Jose Rizal, Philippine's national hero, wrote two novels reflecting the Philippine society under the Spanish rule through the lives of his characters. He vocalized the growing problems of early Philippine society that people were too afraid to face: oppression, inferiority, patronage of the other. He died for empowering the people, giving way for the revolution of 1896 when the people finally fought for their rights. Independence was won (for short period of time), but the same problems written in those books are still relevant to 21st century Philippines, except without Spanish characters but, instead, a Filipino with American ideals. It is still so apparent that every generation needed to be reminded of the famous Filipino saying "*tangkilikin ang sariling atin*", which directly translates to "patronize our own".

The relationship between the United States and the Philippines goes back to the early years of the 20th century when they claimed the Islands from Spain. The society was made to believe that the Americans were the benevolent saviors of the Philippines when they gave the country policies that the Spaniards deprived them of (Schirmer, 38). For decades, Filipinos lived in an illusion that the Americans have our interests in mind (Tañada, 154) when they trained government officials for eventual self-government, free educational program, and tariff-free trade (Schirmer, 35). As a result of these democratic policies, nationalism and loyalty was misplaced creating a separation between the elites and the people.

My curiosity led me to challenge the effect of colonization through a medium I am most familiar with, fashion. I truly believe that fashion is a reflection of our society, and thus I believe in the power of dressing up to visualize our voices. As a designer, I want to design a collection that adds to the increasing Filipino voices who empowers nationalistic pride, cultivating artisan hands to make high quality products, and reviving textiles and techniques almost lost in time and against imported alternatives. I intend to design a collection that portrays a sense of separation from a crippling colonial mentality and unite a common Filipino pride.

Before I embarked and had gotten lost in the research process, I, and possibly many others, understood postcolonialism through the lens of indigenous groups as they fought back their lost power and properties. I came from a colonized nation, yet I also do not claim connecting with any indigenous tribes. Growing up, golf courses and sugar factories were my playground, weekends were about leisurely ventures out to Metro Manila, unbeknownst to the culture and practices of the indigenous tribes of the northern, southern and southern-most regions. Yet I still felt a certain colonial presence as a Filipino. While such is the case for some cultures, like the Maoris in New Zealand, it is not the only issue the Philippines is facing years after colonialism. Robert J.C. Young (64) establishes in his book, *Post Colonialism: An Historical Introduction*, that postcolonialism theory involves multiple priorities and positions, in which colonized societies deal with the effects of oppression differently from one another. The author explains that early colonization was motivated by “the desire for living space or the extraction of riches” and thus producing two different kinds of colonies: “the settled and the exploited, the white and the black, which would be treated differently” (19-20). The issues of the colonial, imperial and anti-colonial past and present, international labor division, people and cultural rights, immigration (voluntary and forced), nomadism, diaspora, role of culture in various fields, liberation struggles, state violence, identity, class and sexuality, racism and indigenous repression all concerns postcolonial studies (66). Many of these issues are present in the Philippine society, including oppression of the indigenous. However, national identity was lost somewhere in history as the country faced succeeding colonial powers before a sense of nationalism was even created amongst the revolutionaries and the people. Lack of national identity allowed colonial presence to pierce the culture in which separation between the elites in power and the people, including indigenous tribes, widens reflecting a Philippine society that operates within the inherited American policies and teachings during their time of colonization.

The American control over the Philippines had a less direct and less formal colonial approach, which “strengthened U.S. controlling mechanisms, [both] economic and cultural ... known today as neocolonialism” (Schirmer and Shalom, 35). Neocolonialism, according to Robert J.C. Young, is essentially a colonial “system of a power relation of economic and political domination” where a “direct domination [previously] employed by the European imperial powers was no longer tenable” (44). In comparison, traditional colonialism involved the expansion of an empire’s territory by obtaining land mass in immediate areas and, in later centuries, aided by the advancement of technologies in travel (i.e. ships), at a world-wide scale with the intention to exploit riches, to convert indigenous population, and/or settle into a new land (Young, 16). The shift from the traditional method to a neocolonial way was forced by these main factors: armed resistance of the colonies, war-exhausted European powers and pressures from other superpowers like the United States (Young, 44). Such was the case for the Philippines in the early 1900s, when the United States won the colonies from Spain after defeating them in the 1898 Spanish-American War. The Filipino people, who had just won their independence from their first oppressors,

resisted against American conquest and a domestic opposition to Philippine occupation (Schirmer, 38). Although the American occupation was comparatively shorter than the Spanish invasion, the influence and impact of the American regime remained popular within the society to this day.

I was in my teens, bored as the family took a long road trip out, when I first questioned “what good had the Americans done for the Philippines?” High school history class only taught us to remember when things happened. I was curious why the society seemed to regard anything from America as being better and modern than anything crafted in the Philippines. The chapters in the book *The Philippines Reader, A History of Colonialism, Neocolonialism, Dictatorship and Resistance*, edited by David Schirmer and Stephen Rosskamm Shalom, took me on a historical journey of the enduring influence of the United States in our society. According to the editors (35), in their *Introduction* to the second chapter, *Colonialism*, the United States established political concessions to help the Philippines for an eventual self-government, promised by the foreign power. Firstly, the colonial government granted Filipinos a seat in the political office giving local influence in the “colonial administrative bureaucracy and civil service”. Next, the public was provided a “free and universal public education” program. Then finally, free trade between the United States and the Philippines was established to sell raw materials such as sugar, coconut oil and tobacco tariff-free to the U.S. market. (Schirmer and Shalom, 35-36). However, while these American political concessions appear democratic and generous, it benefitted those in power while the rest of the population and their culture continued to suffer.

Unlike in the Spanish colonialism, who deprived Filipinos any chance of local government, an influence in the political arena is one of the defining features of the American regime. Seats for municipal and provincial governors were appointed to a Filipino (Schirmer, 41-42). However, although William Howard Taft, responsible for the neo-colonial system imposed onto the Philippines, designed a government that encouraged Filipino participation, loyalty to the United States was a qualification required for a “position of trust and authority” (Schirmer, 41). This policy ultimately gave the U.S. ultimate control over the government carrying an underlying assumption that Filipinos were incapable of governing a nation and are inferior to their white superiors (Schirmer, 40). The seats held by Filipinos in the government were overseen and could be overshadowed by the members of the provincial board, treasurer and supervisor appointed to an American citizen (Schirmer, 41-42). Furthermore, these Filipinos, whom Taft sought out and collaborated with, were of the Philippine population “willing to compromise their nation’s sovereignty in exchange for office”: the Philippine elite, conservatives, landowners and Western-educated individuals. As Robert J.C. Young (59) iterates, the entrustment of government to a “native bourgeois elite” with western presuppositions is part of the reason colonialism is not over as it “reflects the disjunction of their colonial history”.

The decades following the grant for independence from the U.S. by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt via the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934, a sense of nationalism is still barely identified as the idea of an unfinished revolution continues to be in discussion (Bankoff and Weekley, 2). There was an attempt to reshape the Philippine

society in the 1970s, under the dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos's Martial law. However, Filipinos were suspended of many constitutional rights and were expected to be "self-reliant, self-disciplined and self-sufficient" and the military "took care" of anyone doubtful of the Marcos regime (Bankoff and Weekley, 2). A new reform was expected under the presidency of Corazon Aquino and her successors following the success of the 1986 People Power in overthrowing the dictatorship of President Marcos but was left unfulfilled. Today, war against drugs carried out by current President, Rodrigo Duterte, instigated killings of thousands of Filipinos, including those with falsified evidence. Further, most government officials are occupied by wealthy individuals, often through means of nepotism and corruption, and celebrities from the entertainment and sports industries with rare to no political background or education. Bankoff and Weekley (2) put it plainly that "little has changed in the nature of Filipino society or those who control it over the past century."

Perhaps the most effective form of colonization process in the Philippines, was the development of the free public education program, through which the culture was compromised. Education became a tool to teach a new culture and bend historical accounts in a way where American ideals were deemed better, superior and desirable. Just as overseers to the Filipino government officials were American citizens, so was the head of the department of education. The English language was used as a weapon to promote American superiority and attack Philippine nationalism (Schirmer, 35). Renato Constantino (45-49) indicates in his essay, *The Miseducation of the Filipino*, American ideas were conformed through the minds of the youth so that by the time the foreigners hand over sovereignty, those who would take over were "thinking and acting like little Americans". Philippine historical stories were contorted in the American view that the U.S. were the country's saviors from their Spanish oppressors disregarding the efforts of the heroes of the revolutionary (Constantino, 46). Furthermore, the influx of American teachers taught the population the English language, through which, the Filipinos learned a new way of life, far from the traditions and nationalistic ideas of the revolutionaries of the past (Constantino, 47).

To this day, English is used to communicate both formally and casually. There is a certain sophistication and high education associated to a person speaking, wearing and being like an American. Schools continue to conduct learning in the English formally, with the exception of two classes (of about ten). I remember a time in high school when we had to pay the class funds a certain amount when caught speaking our dialect within the hour of an English-taught class. We were a quiet bunch. Even as early as a toddler most families would teach "one, two, three" alongside "*isa, dalawa, tatlo*" (its direct translation). In the metropolitan areas, some signposts are often written in English, often without any local dialect translations, or are mixed with words from the local dialect. While it may seem, in a globalized present, that the Filipinos are hospitable to the English-speaking visitors, the country may experience either of the two possible cultural detriment or both. One, the more English words are used, the less in touch we are with our own dialects and ultimately our culture. Two, the gap between the elites and the rest of the country continues to widen. As Renato Constantino (47) points out, not only had English separated the Filipinos from their past, it also separated the educated Filipinos from the masses.

The Americans further won the Philippine elites when they introduced a free-trade relationship between both nations allowing them to sell raw materials tariff-free (Schirmer, 36). The policies allowed the country to sell raw materials to the Americans, in turn exports the finished product to the Philippines, which were favored by the people for its quality and modern aesthetics. Additionally, such dynamics between superior and dominated was mirrored in the relationship between the elite business owners and workers. The wealthy owners prospered continuously during the colonial period; however, farmer tenants and laborers were exploited. Historian Teodoro Agoncillo, as cited by Schirmer and Shalom (37), wrote that the result of such exploitation “was poor living conditions, agrarian unrest and periodic peasant uprising and laborers’ strike in the 1920s and 1930s”. A feudal agrarian system, since the time of the Spanish colonialism, continued to cripple the poor (Taruc, 63). It had been this way for two decades since the initiation of free trade until the economic crisis in 1929. Furthermore, the free-trade act caused unrest in the American agricultural producers threatened by the cheaper raw materials from the Philippines. Racial riots and discrimination against Filipino farmer immigrants became more apparent as the Depression years rolled through. These struggles and discriminations further the demands for independence and social justice (Taruc, 63), which was granted in 1934.

The implementation of the free trade policies in the Philippines introduced the elites to private entrepreneurship selling products to the American markets. In a neo-colonial system, Young (45) states that independence created a new kind of subservience in a form of capitalist power. Capitalism, in basic terms, is an economic and political system in which the capital is owned privately, and a free market is controlled less, if not at all, by the government (Chappelow). The Philippine society today operates in a mixed capitalist system, where the government has some degree of involvement in business and ownership in select industries (Chappelow). Capitalism, according to Warren (1) results in urbanization. The following decades after independence, the Philippine economy rose, and industrialization happened. However, Heydarian argues in his article for the *Huffpost* in 2015 that the country’s “economic growth haven’t [sic] brought prosperity for the majority of the people”, brought about the continued semi-feudal society, coupled with electoral democracy where comfort for Philippine elites and business owners are sustained. The growing number of work force, for example, increased while jobs were not made available (International Labour Office, 131).

This urbanization affected the people especially in the rural area where plenty of the indigenous tribes resides resulting in the deterioration of a national heritage. One of the biggest crops of the Philippines is rice, however in an article first published in 2008 June issue of *Philippine Tatler*, Baboo Mondoñedo presented the urgent need to save the Banaue rice terraces. Situated in the northern region of the country, it was heralded as the eighth wonder of the world in 1995. However, it is sited to be in danger of losing its World Heritage Site status if not maintained (Mondoñedo). Influence of education on the younger members of the Ifugao tribes, or the mountain people caused for its devaluation. According to Mondonedo, they “show a diminishing interest in their culture and in maintaining their unique legacy”, and traditional practices were replaced with commercial agriculture.

Furthermore, the economic pressures of maintaining a living caused a number of rural families to migrate towards the urban and industrial areas in search for a better source of income. There is little resource to respond from the government, in which, according to Heydarian, outsourced the responsibility of public spaces to profit-driven enterprises.

Colonialism is not over, at least in a neocolonial set up post traditional colonization. Through the infiltration of ideals of the ruling class in the politics, culture and economy onto oppressed society, colonies remain subject to the control of their former masters (Young, 45). Young (45) refers to Gramsci's decolonization analysis of a shift in societies from one that is controlled through physical force to one that no longer is physically subject to a ruling class because its hegemony "was sufficiently established at a cultural, ideological, economic and political level ... by means of prestige and active consent." While technically the Philippines is independently sovereign, the effects of the American policies during their time of occupation has well infiltrated in the society. Disguised in a democratic costume, the Westernization of the Philippines created, in the words of Heydarian, an illusion of modernity and prosperity. What is underneath the mask, however, is a broken nationalism separating the society.

"Roads," and complete silence were the hesitant answer I remembered receiving to my question during that road trip. A simple answer that reflects the effectiveness of the neocolonial policies of the American colonization. Westernization of the Philippines has been accepted as the norm that we barely recognize its effects in the country's people and nationalism. Then perhaps, there is a need to challenge these ideals and remind the people that our misplaced nationalism needs a united society to bring it back to the nation.

Fashion rarely shies away from politics. In a postcolonial time, fashion has been used to convey political message and challenge the conventional ideology. Models of various ethnicities carry the season's latest offerings from brands across the globe. Distinctions between menswear and womenswear are being blurred. Women's rights took center stage. However, there is still Euro-American power dominating even the world of fashion. Fashion designers from colonized areas are barely recognized unless they made their presence known in the west. The designers from the colonized world, has something to say. Guo Pei became the first Chinese designer to be heralded an haute couturier title, one that holds strict guidelines by the French. Native Americans fight for respect on their cultural images and motifs. Hussein Chalayan's Spring 2020 collection is "based around his cogitations as to the effect of colonization upon dance" (Leitch). Fashion designers, activists, writers and the like are now using fashion to spread awareness of pressing issues of the world in the hopes of sending a message of change. As Christopher Wylie boldly pronounces in his interview with Carole Cadwalladr for *The Guardian* (quoted by Bartlett for *Fashion and Politics*) that "politics is downstream from culture, so to change politics you need to change culture. And fashion trends are a useful proxy for that."

Fashion activists in Aotearoa, New Zealand (where I currently reside and study at the time of writing this) provided an identity that reflects its cultural realities different from the hegemony of a colonial image. In a time when New Zealand was made open to the world, there was a need to create a local identity, a point of difference from the rest of the world (de Pont). Young urban Māori and Pasifika created an image reflecting their reality and aspirations different from mainstream fashion (de Pont). Pacific Sisters core members are artists and designers from different Pacific Island and Māori background, who tasked themselves of "weaving together the threads of Polynesian craft and culture with urbanism and activism" (de Pont). Their goal was simple: to "unite their Māori, Pacific Island and New Zealand European origins into a new Aotearoa Pacific identity" using techniques and practices learned from the elders, and materials fit to portray this new identity (de Pont). They showed inclusive one-off non-gendered garments (fig 1) through performances for guests in their warehouse parties (de Pont). With a common background of immigrant



fig. 1 'Kaitiaki with a K; Tāulaolevai Keeper of the Water (Tuna)' by the Pacific Sisters. 2019. New Zealand Fashion Museum.
<http://www.nzfashionmuseum.org.nz/pacific-sisters/>

family, Pacific Sisters members challenged and confused the ideals of their audience with their multicultural and provocative viewpoint (Vercoe, 1997). Pacific Sisters are instrumental in paving the wave of New Zealand fashion that swept across the region (de Pont) reflecting a culture that is true to its country.

Closer to home, the Philippine fashion industry, likewise, understands the importance of fashion in the creation of an image. The *terno*, national costume for women, had gone through multiple meanings throughout history as the environment changes. In the colonial eras, it symbolized a demure and pure Filipina. In the late 20th century, it had become a symbol of dictatorship as it was frequently associated with former first lady, Imelda Marcos, the wife of the Martial law dictator, President Ferdinand Marcos. In the attempt to pull away from the dictatorship image of the *terno*, there was a diminishing popularity of the *terno* as a piece of wardrobe essential. It was, instead, donned as a piece of story-telling prop at a historical play or one's grand-auntie's evening costume at a wedding. Today, a collective effort within the Philippine fashion industry and its advocates to return the *Terno's* symbolism as a cultural heritage, as well as the changing realities of today via an annual conference titled *Ternocon*. The *Ternocon* is a convention and contest with an to promote the traditional technique of making a *terno*. Workshops are held in teaching the techniques of making a *terno*. Young designers compete their three-look *terno* collection, and senior designers showcase a ten-look collection of their interpretations of the *terno*. However, with celebrities, political personalities and members of the elite flock the carpets of Cultural Center of the Philippines where the latest *Ternocon* was held, *Nolisoli's* Zofiya Acosta asks a valid question: "can *terno* be class-neutral?" 2020 Gold Winner Hannah Adrias created a three-look collection unexpected for a *terno*. Designed with the military/utilitarian inspiration (fig. 2), Adrias created a *terno* fit for the modern women "who are on the go and always moving" with an ultimate goal for the *terno* to be appreciated as wearable not as a costume (Tagabucba). Moreover, Acosta quotes the winner which she finds comforting regarding the future of a *terno*: "... I want to make casual clothing that has *terno*/butterfly sleeve for young women to remember our roots". Perhaps, there's a long way to go for all Filipino women to wear the *terno* more often, but the image of a Filipina image is out for anyone to know.



fig. 2 Three-look collection competed by Hannah Adrias at the Ternocon 2020. *Ternocon*. 2020. Philstar. <https://www.philstar.com/lifestyle/fashion-and-beauty/2020/01/29/1988495/ternocon-2020-wearability-millennials-wins>



fig. 3 Buslo Mini Plaid bag by Rags2Riches. 2020. Things That Matter.
<https://thingsthatmatter.ph/collections/rags2riches/products/pre-order-buslo-mini-plaid>

A humbler approach to the goal of empowering Filipinos of all classes are the values and mission of the social enterprise brand Rags2Riches. It prides itself of “empowering community artisans” (Rags2Riches). In its initial stages, Rags2Riches take overstock cloths from garment factories, cut into strips and weave it using a simple technique often used for making *banigs* (mat) or *basahan* (rugs). These woven materials then pieced together to develop a fashionable bag (fig 3). It has since developed into making not just bags and accessories from the *banig* weaving technique, but has also included clothing collection and the use of Filipino textiles of different tribal groups empowering a Filipino identity. Ayesha Mustafa wrote an article for *The Guardian* on the positive

impact Rags2 Riches had on the women of *Payatas*, where many of the country’s poor resides. According to Mustafa, Rags2Riches gave skilled workers a fair share of the business of rugmaking that were often controlled by middlemen who leave them with very minimal earnings. Furthermore, Therese “Reese” Fernandez-Ruiz, co-founder of the brand, developed a “financial, educational and health training” to help the future of the artisans (Shadbolt). When she visited New Zealand in 2017 for an Asia NZ talk on entrepreneurship, I was lucky enough to attend, she proudly held a bank book of saving similar to those she gave her artisans. Moreover, at Rags2Riches, artisans employed to make the materials for the bags come to the brand with their designs, “we have a practice of collaborative design ... if it’s not collaborative, it’s not effective” says Fernandez-Ruiz (Shadbolt).

How I envision the replacing of our nationalism back to the Filipinos is by making a collection of a commercially viable clothes made by Filipinos for anyone who are daring to try new things. As fashion can be a way to visualize one’s identity, I aim to create products where one can be proudly wearing Philippine made. However, I am aware that not all Filipinos can afford items of luxury. Instead, these products are ideally produced in the Philippines, making these products a source of income, enhancing their livelihood and the garment industry of the country in the process. Furthermore, Filipinos are image-driven inspired by what they see is worn by the popular crowd. By aiming people who can afford luxuries, the people visualize a Philippine identity through public figures. The designs, moreover, will use techniques and materials that are unique or easily associated with the Philippine. Starting with the *banig* weaving technique using repurposed garments (as in the nature of rugmaking). The weaving technique will also be used to demonstrate the breaking away from Westernized mentality. For the none-

woven designs, Philippine fabrics (or fabrics that look and feel like them) will be used to complete a balanced look. Furthermore, *terno* sleeves and the *barong tagalog* (men's national costume) will be incorporated in the designs.

I am also looking into the possibility of showcasing the collection through digital media. My friend, Regine Panlilio and I both have culture as the core of our creative work. I have collaborated with her in most, if not all, of my personal and University projects. An idea of creating a fashion film to showcase the collection has crossed both our minds and would like to challenge ourselves to create something a little more unconventional. My audience are not only my immediate peers, tutors and community in New Zealand. Those who need to see and hear the message are Filipinos. Filipinos are spread across the world and digital communication is the cheaper, faster and, possibly more effective way to convey the message.

Residing in New Zealand at a peak of the coronavirus global pandemic, a number of limitations present itself. Sources of Philippine fabrics are limited and with borders closed, shipments are delayed. I gathered as much information and materials as I possibly could when I was last in the Philippines in early 2019 and could possibly be a good start to the design process. Additionally, true Filipino indigenous fabrics are difficult or very expensive to obtain in the metropolitan area where I spent most of my time in. Excursions to the tribal areas in the provinces are needed to visit and acquire these items, which I did not have the time and money to do so. I was able to acquire a woven fabric with Filipino motifs that could work as a stand in. As I do not know the exact source where the retailers got the fabrics from, I cannot fully claim they were tribal made. Further limitation is finding any Filipino artisan who will be able to work with me in completing the materials for the garment. Instead, the immediate Filipino community in New Zealand who are willing to work with me in this project could be my way around it.

Hopefully, this project will be a good start to something new beyond my time in University.

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