Considering that belonging and identity are part of historical processes and that claiming an identity is in tension between the sense of belonging and of difference, I examine here ‘la robe mission’, a garment worn by Kanak women in Lifou and more generally in New Caledonia. The analysis suggests that an imported clothing, clearly part of a strategy to impose a Western-style sense of modesty, was adapted to local uses by Kanak women, and its meaning re-dressed. Nowadays la robe mission, in revised version, is considered part of ‘la coutume’. The dress, a sign which once allowed Westerners to view Kanak women as inferior beings, has become a symbol of identity, which many of my interlocutors claim with pride. The text is based on ethnographic interviews and archival material.