

# **SELF-REPRESENTATION: Shaping Lumban Women Hand Embroiderers' Identity**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Embroidery is an insightful source for studying the articulation and expression of identity. Meaningful discoveries can surface through examining the interaction and relations that are connected in the production of hand embroidered products. Embroidery, as a female craft, symbolizes and reflects the women's lived experiences.

As a center of missionary activities during the Spanish regime in the Philippines, Lumban women hand embroiderers shaped their identity through being exposed to the craft at an early age. Through a creative workshop, it revealed that gender and ethnicity are the two essential factors in shaping their identity. Their perception of their individual identities constitutes the socially constructed roles and behaviors or traits that a woman must possess. Moreover, familial tradition and skills in embroidery helped shape their individual identity as women hand embroiderers, while their collective identity resulted from their strong affinity with their locality, as well as the relationships and friendships that they built as a community of embroiderers.

*Keywords: embroidery, identity, lived experiences, gender, self-representation*

*“Lumban is the only town in Laguna where embroidery has flourished as a major industry, probably because it was the center of missionary activities in the province and therefore, the first students of the art came from here.”<sup>1</sup>*

Lumban is known as the Embroidery Capital of the Philippines. Hand embroidery on fine jusi and piña cloth produces the *barong tagalog* worn by men and the *saya* (Filipiñana) worn by women, which are also exported abroad.

Franciscan missionaries who settled in Lumban, established an Academy to teach and train young boys in music. They built a factory making simple musical instruments. While the boys learned music, young girls were taught embroidery. The music activity eventually died but embroidery flourished and was passed on from one generation to another. It then became a common sight for young girls to be seen doing embroidery. Initially, embroidery served personal needs such as decorating veils, pillowcases, and clothes for the family until some of these works reached Spain and gained recognition. A demand for the product arose and embroidery then became a money-making enterprise. Philippine embroidery gained fame and became available in Europe during the nineteenth century. The craft was then passed down over generations until it became the present industry of Lumban, Laguna.

The Barong Tagalog made the embroidery in this town popular as President Manuel Quezon declared the barong as the Philippines' national dress and after the inauguration of the transition government. Succeeding presidents, Quirino and Magsaysay were also seen donning the barong but what made the embroidery industry in the town reach its peak was when President Ferdinand Marcos officially decreed it the national costume in 1975 (Hila, et. al, 2008). It is, however, First Lady Imelda Marcos' thrust for the Barong Tagalog and Filipiniana gowns to be *de rigueur* attire at government functions that is credited for popularizing the wear (Horn, 2013).

Because of the sudden wide-spread demand, Lumban experienced a shift in the labor arrangements pertaining to the industry. It harnessed the male labor force of the town for even the husbands of *burdaderas* (*female embroiderers*)—who were men in farming—became involved in the business.

In 2013, almost 60% of the municipality was involved in the industry.<sup>2</sup> This included shop owners, embroiderers, artisans in *calado* (type of embroidery where fibers of piña fabric are drawn out to form a lattice work or honeycomb pattern) and eyelet-making, as well as the fishermen and farmers who pulled the textile on a large bamboo *bastador* (a wooden frame that holds the fabric) to wash it before it was embroidered over (Horn, 2013). Locals claim that you can find at least one family member per household who is involved in the craft.

According to the local archives of Lumban,<sup>3</sup> about 30% of its population is presently engaged in hand embroidery.<sup>4</sup> These local craftswomen have received no formal training and most of them learned their craft from their elders or ancestors and the skills are passed down from one generation to another. Lumban's hand embroidery industry mostly comprises small producers particularly within the poblacion area. It is recognized by the local market as a source of good quality hand-embroidered products most especially for its *calado* embroidery. The bulk of local production comes from the made-to-order sector while retail sales from walk-in clients, accounts for about 20%. Hand embroidered products from this town include the Barong Tagalog, ladies wear, wedding gowns, Maria Clara gowns, table linens such as table cloth, runners and coasters, and gift items such as handkerchiefs, bags, wallets, purses, etc.

### **How Lumban Women Hand Embroiderers' Shape their Identity**

*“Masaya at proud kami na ipakilala na magbuburda.*

*Masaya rin yung hinahangaan ka kahit na sa pagbuburda.”*

(We are happy and proud to be recognized as embroiderers.  
It's uplifting to be recognized even in just doing embroidery).

*- Cynthia Dela Cruz, Lumban hand embroiderer*

The word 'identity' used as a term to explain who someone is can be applied and understood quite differently (Gauer, 2011). It is often viewed as twofold — consisting of personal and social identities. One is the personal (individual) identity which illustrates self-perception and self-evaluation of an individual; the social (collective) identity illustrate how the individual

draws identity in a social group or how such membership is viewed by others (Gauer, 2011).

For the women involved in my study, their individual identities constituted their self-perception of the various roles of being woman (wife, mother, daughter), traits or behaviors women must have (e.g. patience, being organized, nurturing, etc.), and how they associated themselves with their family (I am the daughter of..., I am the mother of..., I am the wife of...). These individual identities emanated from a one-day creative workshop where 10 female hand embroiderers of whom 8 are mothers and 2 are teenage daughters, were asked to compose a short autobiographical poem. The creative workshop was designed to know about their life story, their everyday life, the challenges they encounter, their aspirations and visions, how they perform their identity and gender through embroidery, and how they perceive womanhood. At first, the women were apprehensive because they are not used to these kinds of activities. However, once they got comfortable with each other, they began participating and sharing their experiences.

Analyzing their responses to the autobiographical poem to understand how they perceive womanhood and their identity, it turned out that for them, their individual identities were born out of their affiliation with their families and their reflection of womanhood. For example, the mothers associated their womanhood and identity when they entered motherhood.

Cynthia, a widow and mother of five writes in her poem:

*Ako ay babe na mapasensya.*  
*Galing ako sa Lumban.*  
*Lucia ang pangalan ng nanay ko.*  
*Ako ay isang sinulid.*  
*Babae ako dahil ako'y naging isang ina.*  
(I am a woman of patience.  
I am from Lumban.  
Lucia is the name of my mother.  
I am a thread.  
I am a woman because I became a mother.)

Cristine, a thirty year old mother of two who is the sole breadwinner of their family:

*Sinulid*

*Ako ay babae na madiskarte.*

*Galing ako sa Lumban.*

*Tambor<sup>s</sup>, sinulid, karayom at tela.*

*Isip, puso at kamay.*

*Babae ako dahil naging ina ako.*

*Burdadera ako dahil kahit anong tahi, kaya kong gawin.*

(Thread

I am a street-smart woman.

I am from Lumban.

Tambor, thread, needle and fabric.

Mind, heart, and hands.

I am a woman because I became a mother.

I am an embroiderer because whatever the stitches I can do them all.)

Joy, Justine's mother, has seven children and helps her husband support the family by doing embroidery. Her husband is out of town most of the time and she's the one left to look after the family everyday.

*Ako ay babae na mapasensya.*

*Galing ako sa Lumban.*

*Sinulid. Puso.*

*Babae ako dahil naging nanay ako.*

*Burdadera ako dahil magaling akong magburda.*

(I am a patient woman.

I am from Lumban.

Thread. Heart.

I am a woman because I am a mother.

I am an embroiderer because I am good at it.)

The way they composed their poems were not only a reflection of their identity as women – as mothers – but also a reflection of their lives. Cynthia saw herself as patient and enduring. Her husband got into an accident that had rendered him ill and bedridden for many years before he passed away. As a young mother with five children, she took on the role of

both mother and father to them while also taking care of her sick husband. Thus, she saw patience as an important trait in herself, as being a woman, and a mother; and *sinulid* as representation of the entanglements in her life when she faced challenges.

Cristine, a mother of two also found the essence of her womanhood when she became a mother. Most of her time is devoted to her young children and she can only work when her children are in school. The most important elements of embroidery for her are the *tambor*, *sinulid*, *karayom* and *tela* because this allows her to create pieces that provide their livelihood and makes her family survive. Cristine has a high regard for her job because "*Dito [embroidery] ko po kunukuha lahat ng pambayad sa gastusin araw-araw.*" (We get by with our daily expenses from embroidery earnings).

Joy also believed that the onset of womanhood is when one becomes a mother. As she has seven children, all of whom live with her while her husband works away from home, she considers the mindset as an important factor in her life. There are times when she cannot avoid thinking negative thoughts because of their family set-up but she also knows that she is the only one who can stop these negative thoughts and focus on more urgent concerns. For her, the heart is symbolic of her love and affection for her family which gives her strength despite their hardships in life while *sinulid* is a representation of her life's challenges and struggles.

Leony, who does not see embroidery as her ideal job. but still chooses to do it because of the flexibility it offers her, writes in her poem,

*Karayom*  
*Ako ay babae na masikap.*  
*Galing ako sa Lumban.*  
*Kamay*  
*Babae ako dahil naging nanay ako.*  
*Burdadera ako dahil karayom ang gamit ko.*  
 (A Needle.  
 I am a hardworking woman.  
 I am from Lumban.  
 Hands.  
 I am a woman because I became a mother.

I am an embroiderer because I use a needle.)

She, too, believes that her essence of womanhood was realized when she became a mother. She also considers her hands an important aspect of her life because she uses them to work and to care for her husband and children.

Rose, Cynthia's younger sister, is among the most skilled hand embroiderers in Lumban. She considers womanhood as being able to effectively manage the household. Along with managing the household, comes sharpness of mind, and the use of hands to be able to carry out all the responsibilities required of her. She writes in her poem,

*Gunting*

*Ako ay babaeng matalino.*

*Asawa ako ni Salvador Mercado.*

*Galing ako sa Lumban.*

*Tambor. Isip at kamay.*

*Babae ako dahil magaling ako magpalakad ng pamilya. Burdadera ako dahil matalio ako at mahal ko ang pagbuburda. (Scissors*

I am a woman that is intelligent.

I am the wife of Salvador Mercado.

I am from Lumban.

Tambor. Mind and hands.

I am a woman because I manage my household well.

I am an embroiderer because I understand and I love embroidery.)

Anda Manic, the oldest embroiderer in Lumban, reinforces Rose's perception of womanhood. She implies in her poem that as a woman and as a mother, one gives unconditional love to one's husband and children; all that a woman does, all that she sacrifices, is for the family. She writes in her poem,

*Bastidor*

*Nagsimula akong magburda gamit ang bastidor sa Lumban, Laguna.*

*Importante sa akin ang aking pamilya, pangalawa kay Lord.*

*Lahat galing sa puso.*

*Dahil ako ay babae, ginawa ko ang lahat para sa pamilya.*

(The Frame.

When I began embroidering I used the bastidor here in Lumban, Laguna.

My family is important to me, second to the Lord.

Everything comes from the heart.

Because I am a woman, I do everything for my family.)

These lines reflect her experience of sacrificing many things when her children were growing up, forgoing luxuries and spending only on things that really mattered, just so she and her husband could provide for their needs, especially their education. As a matter of fact, she still helps in paying for the school fees of her grandchildren. She is not obligated to do this, but she willingly does it because she loves her family and wants to continue to offer help as long as she can.

Marciana, one of the oldest hand embroiderers in Lumban at age 77, still works to support her family. In her poem below, it is evident that embroidery serves an important purpose in her life. She also believes in the importance of having faith as mentioned in her poem. Marciana shared in her interview that she knew she does not have much time in this world and she worries about her children and grandchildren. She gets her strength everyday by praying and lifts up to God all her worries and troubles.

*Pinya tela*

*Ako ay babae na marunong manahi.*

*Ang aking panalangin ay para kay Lord.*

*Nagsimula akong manahi sa Lumban.*

(Pineapple fabric

I am a woman who knows how to sew.

My prayers are offered to the Lord.

I began embroidering in Lumban.)

Maria still accepts embroidery orders to support her family including her grandchildren. Embroidery for her is important because it provides her family an opportunity to earn money for their daily sustenance. When she said in her interview that she is *masinop* (frugal), it was a reflection of her experience of not being able to eat decent meals when they did not have money. Thus, she maintains that she has to spend their money wisely and ensure it does not happen again. She writes in her poem,



*Sinulid*

*Babae ako na masinop.*

*Galing ako sa aking ina na si Margarita.*

*Ako ay galing sa Lumban.*

*Sinulid at karayom.*

*Babae ako. Burdadera ako*

(Thread

I am a frugal woman.

I came from my mother, Margarita.

I am from Lumban.

Thread and needle.

I am a woman. I am an embroiderer.)

For Justine and Sam, both teenagers, their perception of womanhood is performing the roles and expectations that are required of them. Justine writes,

*“Ako ay babae na matiyaga.*

*Galing ako sa Brgy. Wawa.*

*Sinulid at karayom.*

*Isip, mata, at puso.*

*Babae ako dahil kaya kong gawin ang mga gawaing bahay.*

*Burdadera ako dahil kaya kong pagandahin at makatapos ng isang tahi.”*

(I am a hard-working woman.

I am from Brgy. Wawa.

Thread and needle.

Mind, eyes, and heart.

I am a woman because I can handle household chores.

I am an embroiderer because I can carry through and finish an embroidered piece.)

Justine is praised by her family for being a responsible young woman. Despite her age, she prioritizes her studies and family and accepts embroidery jobs during her free time to earn and support her education.

Sam, a high school student and Justine’s friend, believes in the importance of preserving the embroidery legacy of their town. Like Justine, Sam is also praised by her family for being diligent and helpful in the house. She wrote in her poem,

*Sinulid*

*Ako ay babae na masipag.*

*Galing ako sa Lumban, Laguna.*

*Gunting at karayom. Kamay, katawan, at isip.*

*Babae ako dahil ako ay matiyaga at mabait.*

*Burdadera ako dahil marunong akong manahi.*

(Thread

I am a hardworking woman.

I am from Lumban, Laguna.

Scissors and needle. Hands, body, and mind.

I am a woman because I am patient and kind.

I am an embroiderer because I know how to sew.)

These poems clearly show that the performed gender-specific behaviors that De Beauvoir theorized about hold true for these women. They identify themselves as women because of the functions they assume and internalize the traits they believe a woman should possess (*mapasensya, matiyaga, masipag, masinop, magaling magpalakad ng pamilya, ginagawa ang lahat para sa pamilya*—patient, hardworking, frugal, good at managing the household, does everything possible for the family). They believe that being a woman constitutes these responsibilities and behaviors, which are in reality social constructs established in Philippine society during the Spanish era. This division of labor based on gender replaced the equal status men and women enjoyed in the pre-Christian era. Although these women contributed financially to the household, they never included it in their perception of womanhood. I was waiting for someone to articulate that she was a woman because she was a productive member of their household, but no one considered her ability to earn from her labor as significant. What these women held important were the stereotyped roles and behavior that were deeply embedded in their consciousness—*I became a mother...*, *I can do household chores...*, *I am patient...*, *I can embroider...*, *I do everything for my family...* What this indicates is that these social constructs of gender regarding role and behavior are still prevalent in contemporary Lumban community and that it is difficult to hurdle the Maria Clara notion.

The women who participated in my study also took pride in a collective identity—that of being embroiderers. They shared the same social groups—of women doing hand embroidery—and also shared the same

identity attached to their town, that is, if you're from Lumban, you must know how to embroider. This collective identity of being embroiderers is formalized through affiliation with embroidery associations such as the House of LEA (Lumban Embroidery Association). However, regardless of membership in associations, if a woman is from Lumban and she knows how to embroider, she automatically gets this identification. The collective identity of being women embroiderers also surfaced from their community. In a community with almost everyone practicing the craft, it is not surprising to find an embroiderer even in a small barangay or cluster of communities.

These women had established a collective identity of being embroiderers and it mattered to them that the tradition was passed on to the younger generation. Some of the older women even said, "*Parang nakakahiya po kapag taga Lumban ka, tapos hindi ka marunong manahi*" (It would be embarrassing to be from Lumban and not know how to embroider). It has become their brand that they value and take so much pride in.

Looking deeper into this statement "*Parang nakakahiya kapag taga Lumban ka tapos hindi ka marunong manahi*" (It would be embarrassing to be from Lumban and not know how to embroider.) I find that it poses a negative judgment for those who choose a different path in their career. It is as if there is a chasm between women who embroider and those who choose to become a factory worker, or a house helper, or a vendor. For example, Joy's eldest daughter does not want to embroider. She has not even tried to learn the skill. She told me that she wanted to go to college, but they could not afford it. However, instead of learning embroidery, she is keen on finding a job outside Lumban. Joy firmly believes that her daughter must learn how to embroider so she can make use of her time productively while waiting for a job opportunity. But her daughter does not want to follow her advice. While she was telling me this, I could sense her disappointment and when the grandmother (Joy's mother) joined our conversation, I sensed the same from her.

Throughout my conversations with the women involved in my study, the comparison of Lumban women who embroider and Lumban women who do not, inevitably surfaced without direct interrogation. The phrase "*parang nakakahiya kapag taga-Lumban ka pero hindi ka marunong magburda*" (It would be embarrassing to be from Lumban and not know how

to embroider) came from the middle-aged women who participated in my study. I tried to discern as to why this was so. Perhaps it was because of their distress at the declining number of women who chose to pursue this profession. But then did it mean that those who opted not to embroider were less of a Lumban local than those who could embroider? Was it really that important for them to follow an unwritten rule — the woman should know how to embroider — because it was the tradition of the family and the town? For communities such as Lumban, it is of utmost importance that familial traditions are followed and respected. The elders feel that they are valued and held in esteem if the young ones follow their advice.

Urbanization and a desire for a better life have greatly influenced the younger generation of Lumban to seek jobs outside the town even if it meant leaving their families and the tradition that their elders value. These tensions and challenges continue to threaten the embroidery industry in the town and although the answers to the questions presented above are subjective, based on my interviews with the women hand embroiderers, it is evident that they saw the importance of valuing the tradition and culture of their town. It seems that the intent of their remark was not to cause division but to perhaps convince those who chose not to embroider to participate in the preservation of their tradition.

Through several interviews with my respondents, I was able to discern how this individual and collective identity of being *burdaderas* surfaced in their lives. It was through (1) a shared history — how they learned embroidery at a young age and (2) the kind of skills they acquired with constant practice.

## **FAMILY HISTORY**

The legacy of embroidery skills within families connects the women with each other. Thus, familial tradition is an integral part in these women's lives as embroiderers. The tradition has been passed on from one generation to another and these women learned how to embroider from another woman from their family – mother, grandmother, aunt, older sister, or female cousin. Most of the Lumban women come from a lineage of embroiderers – from grandmothers to grandchildren. All of the women I interviewed grew up in this tradition and had fond memories associated with embroidery.

Anda Manic, at 85, the eldest among my respondents, and the oldest living hand embroiderer in Lumban, took on the responsibility of helping her mother raise her younger siblings. Embroidery was her mother's source of income, while her father spent his time growing crops on the farm. Asked why she became an embroiderer, she responded with pride, "*Alam mo, yun ang kinagisnan ko sa aking mga magulang. Ang aking nanay, nagburda talaga. Itinuro niya yun sa amin, kaya ayun na ang naging hanapbuhay namin.*" (I learned embroidery from my parents. My mother was the one doing embroidery and she taught us [her other siblings] the skills and eventually it became our livelihood).

The other women simply said that they were born in the tradition of having a female figure (usually the mother) doing embroidery in the household. The craft was instilled in their consciousness from a very young age, so much so that even if their parents did not give them hands-on training, they learned just by observing and watching their elders. Fiddling with the works of their mothers eventually honed their skills in embroidery. Leony vividly remembers how her mother used to scold her when she would meddle with her embroidery works. She recalls, "*Nung bata ako palagi akong napapagalitan ng nanay ko kasi, nagburda sya, tapos aalis saglit, iiwan yung tahiin nya. Ayan na gagalawin ko na yan! Tapos pagbalik nya makikita nya iba na yung tahi, mapapagalitan na ako. Pero dahil sa mga paturek turok ko na ganun sa pakikialam eh natutunan ko na rin magburda. Hindi talaga ako tinuruan, sa pakikialam lang ako natuto, at saka sa panonood ko sa nanay ko.*" (When I was a young girl my mother always scolded me because when she left her embroidery work, I would tamper with the stitches. When she returned, she would see the difference and so I would get scolded. But because of that meddling with her work, I learned how to embroider. She [mother] didn't really teach me how, but through constant meddling and watching her do it, I learned it on my own).

Justine and Sam, although new to embroidery, also learned the skill by watching and observing their mothers and grandmothers. Sam told me, "*Ito po natuto lang po ako sa panonood sa nanay at lola ko. Minsan po nakikialam ako sa tahiin nila hanggang sa natuto nalang po ako.*" (I learned embroidery by watching my mother and grandmother. Sometimes I meddled with their work and eventually I learned [embroidery]).

This family history involving embroidery is an important factor as to why Lumban women continue the tradition. Having learned it from their mothers, embroidery gives them a special kind of connection with their mothers such that even if they don't see each other, or the mothers have passed on, embroidery connects them in a special way. As Joy explained, "*Yung naibigay sa aking alam ng nanay ko, nandito lang sa akin, hindi na yan mawawala. Kahit ano pang mangyari, natuto ako manahi dahil sa aking ina*" (What I have learned from my mother will always be with me, it cannot be taken away. Whatever happens, I learned embroidery because of my mother).

This special connection extends to her daughter, Justine, who also embroiders. She is proud that among her children, Justine has chosen to learn embroidery of her own free will. Justine also cherishes the time she spends with her mother while doing embroidery. Additionally, there is a sense of pride in knowing that the family tradition is passed on to the younger generation. As Joy expressed it, "*Yung natutunan ko sa aking magulang, naibigay ko na rin sa anak ko. Marunong na rin sya manahi. Masaya at proud ako kasi sinusundan ni Justine ang ginagawa ko.*" (I was able to transfer the knowledge to my daughter, Justine. She also knows how to embroider. I am happy and proud because she's following in my footsteps.)

The importance of this familial tradition extends to intergenerational links in continuing the tradition of hand embroidery. Not only is this craft practiced by women throughout Lumban history, but it is a tradition that has been passed from one generation to another.

From the stories of the women involved in my study about their family history, their mothers were the main influence in their learning of the skills in embroidery and the same can be said of most women embroiderers who are natives of Lumban. Simone de Beauvoir explains the complex mother-daughter relations in her book *The Second Sex* (1989) thus:

"So, when a child comes under their care, women apply themselves to changing her into a woman like themselves; and even a generous mother, who sincerely seeks her child's welfare, will as a rule think that it is wiser to make a 'true woman' of her, since society will more readily accept her if this is done. ...feminine virtues are urged upon her, she is

taught cooking, sewing, housekeeping, along with care of her person, charm and modesty” (p. 286).

As for the girl, “she imitates her mother and identifies herself with her” (p. 286).

Anda Manic was taught by her mother both the skills in embroidery as well as taking responsibility in helping her mother raise her other siblings. She was groomed to be a little woman, just like her mother, in embroidery and in caring for the family. With twenty-three (23) siblings, the older women among them assisted in raising the younger siblings. This is because women were deemed to be more caring, responsible, and nurturing in their society. They were expected to be in the house because the men are out working in the field. Again, the division of gender specific labor was inculcated in their minds early on, and this was what Anda Manic did when she found a man to be her husband. Anda Manic replicated the life of her mother – having children of her own (though not as many as her mothers), staying at home to care for her children and husband, do embroidery to earn money while taking care of her family, even as her husband worked in the field, fulfilling his gender defined role. Unconsciously, the influence of her mother had stayed with her, and because of the fond memories she had while growing up and doing embroidery with other women in her environment, it seemed like the most natural way to live her life. Accustomed to what she was used to doing and in her environment, she pursued the life that was expected of her – to become an embroiderer. As Parker (1984) has noted:

“The child sees in the mother’s face a reflection of him or herself, mediated by the mother’s feelings of love and acceptance. The embroiderer sees a positive reflection of herself in her work and, importantly, in the reception of work by others” (p. xx).

This positive reflection Anda Manic had of her work and herself helped her decide to continue doing what was expected of her.

The other women who participated in my study also shared the same experience with their mothers and/or grandmothers. Embroidery was instilled in their consciousness at a young age such that certain actions and

behaviors seemed to come naturally to them. The connection that embroidery has established in the mother-daughter relationship in Lumban, went beyond the skills and has even prepared them for the bigger responsibilities of womanhood when they become wives and mothers. Trained from a young age, the girls learned to behave according to this social construct. Responsibilities at home were assigned to them. Discipline, patience, grooming, and hygiene were taught to them early on because these are the traits that embroidery requires. These things were done unconsciously and perhaps unintentionally but it had become the way of life in most mother-daughter relationships I encountered in my study.

Angie is a mother of six and who also learned embroidery from her mother when she was sixteen (16) years old said that, *“Malaking bagay talaga na ito ay tradisyon ng pamilya kaya nandito rin ako sa pananahi. Nagisnan ko na ang nanay ko, mga tiyahin ko, lola ko, mga kapatid ko nananahi talaga. May in-apply-an ako dating trabaho, yaya, kaso hindi ko rin natagalan. Kasi yung anak ko nun maliit pa. Wala rin mag-aalaga kaya umuwi nalang ako dito.”* (It is of great significance for me that this is my family’s tradition, which is the reason I am also embroidering. My mother, aunts, grandmother, sisters – they’re all embroiderers. I applied for a job before but it did not last because my child then was very small. There was no one else to take care of her so I came home.)

Unconsciously, embroidery turned out to be their way of reconnecting the ties and identifying themselves with their own mothers especially if fond memories were associated with it. Without realizing it, one of the reasons why they came back to embroidery, aside from being able to look after their family while earning, was to fulfill and continue the tradition of their family which directly connected them to their mothers. Continuing the legacy of their mothers and foremothers became their way of ensuring that the special family ties were not broken. In such a case, then, it reinforced the idea that a woman’s domain was not only the home but everything that goes along with it, including keeping it intact and preserving her legacy.



## SKILLS IN EMBROIDERY

Embroidery is Lumban's domain and depending on the time and skills of embroiderers, their works range from the simple to complicated output. Having been exposed to this craft from the time they were born, these women acquired the skills for embroidery by observing their elders manipulate threads to create a design. These women first learned the basic stitches and simple designs until they were ready for the more complicated ones.

It was the case with Anda Manic, who when she first started, would only work with simple stitches, the technique of which she learned on her own by watching her mother. As she became engrossed in embroidery, her skills developed until such time that she was ready for more complicated designs and stitches. Along the course of our conversations, she showed me her *tambor*. The edges of the fabric must be stretched in the *tambor* to avoid it being limp which would result in uneven stitches. She demonstrated to me the proper way of stitching – not too tight and not too loose. The needle must be pinned and pulled carefully so that designs stay in place as drawn. This, according to her, is where good and bad embroidery can be seen, whether in simple or complicated designs.

In Lumban, a *burdadera* is considered skilled if her works are *makinis* (smooth with stitches of even quality), *pino at sunod sa korte* (fine and follows the design or shape), *masinsin* (fine and compact), *mabintog* (embossed), *hindi kita ang palaman o bituka* (bundled threads are not loose and not visible [in the embossed design]) and *makinang* (resplendent). In addition, she can make adjustments in the designs and can even come up with her own designs if patterns are not available.

Lumban embroiderers work on *calado* embroidery, where *burdaderas* have to slightly dampen the cloth, draw it out thread by thread, and then stitch it all together to achieve the *calado* look. They also work on *burda*, wherein designs are embossed to give depth and volume to the design. Then, there is the ethnic pattern, which is usually conceptualized by the *burdaderas* themselves, especially if designs are not available. Embroidered products generally employ a combination of *calado*, *burda*, and ethnic designs, using different kinds of stitches.

Acquiring the skills of embroidery is something that is closely related to womanhood in the Lumban community. As culture dictates how women should behave, there are also prescriptions in executing embroidery. There is an assumption that embroidery skills are one way to ascertain whether a girl is ready to become a woman. The skills mentioned above (precision in executing stitches, careful pulling of thread and needle, smooth and even stitching, *pino*, etc.) along with their individual techniques in stitching and design, all constitute a predisposed behavior learned to be performed at a young age — from the time they were merely watching their mothers work on embroidery products until the time that they were able to create their own works. These techniques, though not really taught but learned on their own, provide women freedom to work at their own pace and capacity. These techniques were not imposed upon them but because they were exposed to them when growing up, they followed what they saw and incorporated the same techniques in their own designs. Traditional patterns and designs found in Lumban embroidery have been inherited from ancestors. Although most women do not understand the cultural meaning of these designs, they continue to produce them in order to showcase the heritage of traditional hand embroidery. Their own techniques and choice of design that they execute, give their individual work their own identity.

In terms of expressing their identity through embroidery, it can be seen in the way stitches and designs are executed in the finished product. Among themselves, they can identify whose embroidery piece is, based on the stitching style, and design. For instance, the peacock design is famously associated with the embroiderers of *Burda de Filipinas*, a shop in Lumban. The shop's *burdaderas* also create fine works with precise and small stitches. Works of new embroiderers are also easy to identify based on the stitching. Anda Manic tells me, "*Kung maganda kang manahi, kilala mo yan kung sino ang baguhan pa lang at kung sino yung pangit. Makikilala mo yan sa turok. Yung iba makikita mo madilak ang mata, butas-butas.*" (If you're a skilled embroiderer, you can spot who is a novice and whose work is ugly. You can tell it in the stitches. You would see their work with big gaps and holes).

The creative process of finding form for an idea transforms not only the embroidered product but the woman making it as well. Her ideas are transformed into physical objects with coherent form and value that exist, both inside her mind and in the world she occupies. Hence, it can be said

that embroidery is in a way, a venue for these women in expressing not only their emotions and identity but also parts of their lives. Although their works are not really for personal use nor are they intended for self-expression, a part of themselves is still incorporated in these embroidered products.

A wearer or user of these products might not overtly see it, but these embroidered pieces mean more than their utilitarian aspect. The hand embroidered finished product carries with it a woman's identity, parts of herself, of her state of well-being, aspirations and struggles. In short, it carries with it parts of her life that the consumer may never know. To consider these embroidered products as merely decorative and status symbols, devoid of any significant content, is sheer disrespect for the women who created them. For this unique interlaced relationship of the women with their work, connects them to the people who wear or use their hand embroidered products.

Apart from imparting the 'correct' way of doing things around the house and how to behave as a fine lady, practising embroidery has taught these women the feminine virtue of patience. Honing their skills in embroidery required patience in repeatedly undoing and doing stitches without complaining and putting together intricate designs with care, until one got it right. This, in turn, also meant patience in child rearing and understanding the husband. The responsibilities of motherhood are sometimes overwhelming, especially for the women who have many children. Patience is a virtue that has proved to be advantageous for the women of Lumban in managing the home. Feminine virtues of cleanliness and orderliness are both applied to herself, her home, as well as in doing embroidery. They agree that good grooming and looking presentable to other people, is essential behavior along with being organized and always clean. Nila, a non-native of Lumban who learned embroidery through her neighbors when she moved to the town, said as much, "*Ang babae ay kailangan malinis sa gamit at sa sarili, hindi burara, at dapat marunong rin mag-ayos. Syempre pag nagburda ka dapat malinis rin yung kamay mo kasi hahawa yung dumi sa tahiin. Yung gamit sa pananahi dapat nakaayos para hindi ka nahihilo sa paghahanap kung nasaan ang karayom, sinulid.*" (A woman must be clean with her things and with herself, not careless or shabby and must know how to be organized. Of course, when you're doing embroidery, your hands must be clean otherwise, the dirt will transfer to the fabric. The tools for the embroidery must be organized so you won't go dizzy looking for them).

In addition, grace and finesse are seen not only in embroidered products but while they are being worked on as well. A good output of an embroidered product is finely executed and smooth. Those with keen eyes and a taste for embroidery know this and as they judge an embroidered product of excellent quality if the designs, lines, and curves express the grace and finesse of the woman who embroidered it. As Anda Manic explained, "*Kapag maalam kang tumingin ng burda, yung talagang burda sa kamay, alam mo kung ang gumawa nun ay masasabing maalam talaga o hindi. Ang galaw ng kamay ay importante dahil dito lalabas kung maluwag o mahigpit ang sinulid.*" (If you have a keen eye on embroidery, specifically hand embroidery, you will know if the embroiderer is skilled or not. Hand movements are important because it is here that it is clear whether the stitches are loose or taut). Grace in the movement of the hands plays an important role in the execution of designs and overall look of the embroidered product.

Similar to de Beauvoir's claim that gender is constructed, the techniques and aesthetics employed in embroidery are also constructed, and repeatedly performed by these women. The designs and patterns were created and established centuries ago although the cultural significance of each design has been lost in time. Most of the *burdaderas* learned from their mothers or grandmothers and they just applied the same patterns to their own work. To veer away from the prescribed aesthetic requirements in embroidery (*makinis, pino, masinsin*) which is achieved through mastering skills, means to deviate from and debase the value of the finished product. In fact such a product commands a lower price or sometimes, does not get sold and is returned to its maker. Moreover, the lost value of these embroidered products also means lost identity (as embroiderer) for the woman who created it. Sometimes, a woman can negotiate this by undoing or repairing bad stitches. The *pagtatastas ng tahi* (undoing of stitches) means stripping off the previous work and *pagkukumpuni* (repairing of stitches) means correcting wrong stitches. *Pagtatastas* means literally not only stripping off the stitches but implies a figurative meaning of stripping off an embroiderer's identity, even temporarily, because it means her work was not at par with the standards of embroidery. She can regain her identity once she corrects the stitches and her work is acceptable to her superiors (managers, shop owners, clients, etc.). Thus, skill in embroidery is closely attached to a Lumban woman's identity; without it, she cannot claim to be known as an esteemed embroiderer. This is why being recognized as an embroiderer is both a source of pride and esteem

for these women. Learning the skill is a long painstaking process which takes years to be developed. It is performed over and over again until you master the skills in embroidery and you can become a “master”.

## CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to find out how the women of Lumban, Laguna shaped their identity as embroiderers. We learnt that Lumban was a center of missionary activities during the Spanish regime in the Philippines, and consequently its women hand embroiderers shaped their identity through the following markers (a) gender – being women, they were expected to follow through with the centuries-old tradition of hand embroidery and to continue the legacy of family tradition, which was passed on through the women in the family. Their skills in embroidery is closely associated with the social constructs of womanhood and it is evident in their lived experiences. (B) Ethnicity - simply being a Lumbeño, which carries with it a responsibility of knowing how to embroider, and by being exposed to the tradition of hand embroidery inherited from their foremothers and other women in their family. Embroidery links them with their mothers and foremothers that transcend time through skills they learned from them. Being a Lumbeño woman is both a responsibility and an identity for these women.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>From the local archives about the history of Lumban embroidery from the office of Tourism of the local government of Lumban

<sup>2</sup>At the time the study is conducted, there is no actual figure of people engaged in this craft in the town of Lumban.

<sup>3</sup>Local archives of the Tourism Department of the Local Government of Lumban, Laguna.

<sup>4</sup>There is no actual figure of people engaged in embroidery in Lumban at the time the study was conducted.

<sup>5</sup>Tambor is a wooden frame that held the fabric taut.

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