



***Mandirigma* and *Babaylan*: Deconstructing the Patriarchal Society of the Philippines**

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ABSTRACT

Maria Clara has long been considered in popular and critical discourse as an archetypal Filipina associated with refinement, obedience, religiosity, and moral restraint. While historically significant, this colonial reading has tended to obscure other dimensions of Filipina identity. This study deconstructs the Maria Clara archetype by analyzing two narratives: the legend of Urduja, a warrior leader of Pangasinan, and Abadeha: The Philippine Cinderella (de la Paz, 2001), a retelling rooted in indigenous cosmology. Drawing on Wollstonecraft (1891), Mohanty (2003), Garcia (2009; 2013), and Mananzan (1999; 2016), the study employed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013). Three thematic clusters emerged: political and martial agency, spiritual resilience and *babaylanic* power, and egalitarian leadership and communal harmony. These themes present Urduja and Abadeha as counter-images of Maria Clara, recovering precolonial traditions where women exercised leadership, spirituality, and communal responsibility. Findings underscore the importance of Filipino folktales as educational tools to challenge colonial stereotypes and inspire inclusive visions of gender equality.

KEYWORDS

babaylan, decolonize feminism, *mandirigma*, reflexive thematic analysis

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Introduction

The Philippines endured over three centuries of Spanish colonization, which established permanent effects on its social structures and cultural practices and its systems of gender identity. The Maria Clara archetype, drawn from Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*, is a major cultural influence of Filipino heritage. The literary and research communities have often regarded Maria Clara as an idealized image of the Filipina, associated with refinement, obedience, religiosity, and moral restraint. Scholars have observed that this archetype normalized expectations of women's patience, modesty, loyalty, and self-effacement, turning Maria Clara into a cultural shorthand for "ideal womanhood" in the Philippine imagination (Sanchez, 2015).

Yet historians and feminist scholars have contested this image, emphasizing that the so-called elevation of women under Spanish rule has often been interpreted as an erosion of earlier forms of social prominence, shaped by the imposition of Marian devotion as a religious and cultural model. Pre-colonial records and oral traditions suggest alternative patterns of gender relations, in which women held political and economic roles, could succeed in leadership positions, and participated in communal decision-making. Many scholars thus argue that rigid patriarchal dominance was intensified through colonial structures, transforming societies that had previously exhibited more complementary and egalitarian tendencies.

Before the Spanish colonization, gender relations in many Philippine communities had been described as exhibiting patterns of balance and complementarity. Mallari (2013) explains how the *mandirigma* (warriors) and *babaylan* (spiritual leaders) were both crucial in tribal communities, reflecting a form of gendered authority distribution between warfare and spirituality. These images contrast with later colonial representations of femininity associated with restraints and moral obedience and suggest the need to revisit narratives that foreground precolonial and indigenous forms of egalitarianism.

However, relatively few studies have employed folktales or localized retellings to examine and problematize colonial archetypes of the Filipina. This paper addresses that gap by examining Urduja, a legendary warrior princess, and Abadeja, a Filipinized retelling of the narratives of the Cinderella stories that embeds indigenous spirituality. By analyzing how these narratives depict the Filipina as a warrior and *babaylan*, situating them alongside dominant readings of the Maria Clara figure, and discussing their educational and cultural implications, this study positions folktales as vehicles for reclaiming egalitarian gender ideals. Promoting such narratives in children's literature offers pathways for challenging colonial stereotypes and reshaping Filipino identity toward a more inclusive and balanced society.

Literature Review

Before the arrival of Magellan, the Philippines had already developed its own system of social organization and cultural practices, within which gender relations in many communities have been described as relatively balanced and complementary. Native societies used to acknowledge the

contributions of both men and women and their flexible ways of sharing tasks and power. The arrival of the Spanish colonizers, however, brought a significant societal shift. Rafael (2018) noted how Spanish friars had more influence than soldiers with their control of religion, politics, education, and cultural development. Their influence gradually grounded hierarchical and patriarchal structures that changed the traditional patterns of gender relations.

Maria Clara's literary and cultural identity was developed in this colonial milieu. Among the characters of Jose Rizal, Maria Clara has had, as Hau (2020) observes, a "lingering afterlife," continuously reinterpreted as both admired and pitied, cherished and dismissed, yet consistently remaining dominant as an archetype. This constructed image was closely related to Marian devotion that colonizers used to symbolically elevate women through ideals of purity and moral discipline while simultaneously encouraging obedience, loyalty, and self-restraint. Similarly, Salvador Lopez (1940) argues that Maria Clara's representation of modesty and loyalty serves to satirize colonial society by constraining women's social roles, which reflects Rizal's true intentions. Despite such nuance, Maria Clara became deeply embedded in the Filipino imagination as a primary model of womanhood, while colonial patriarchal values continued to persist in Filipino society.

Maria Clara's "afterlife" persists in contemporary popular culture. For example, the band Sugarcane uses its song *Maria Clara* to present her as the ideal Filipina woman who embodies beauty and purity, while the local television series *Maria Clara at Ibarra* reimagines her alongside a modern counterpart, Klay, whose time-traveling character brings modern feminist views that challenge traditional interpretations of Maria Clara. As Hau (2020) notes, Maria Clara endures through time because of her ability to adapt through commodification and transmedial storytelling that continuously transform her for new audiences. In this sense, Maria Clara is not merely a figure but a transmissible symbol whose meaning shifts across literature, film, television, and even political discourse.

The continuing use of this symbol has caused popular culture to marginalize precolonial female figures in popular imagination. The animated film *Urduja*, which features the voice of Regine Velasquez, had only a brief presence in Philippine popular culture. This shows how colonial-era representations remained more prominent than indigenous narratives that might otherwise showcase earlier egalitarian social ideals.

Mohanty's (2003) critique of Western feminism provides a useful analytical lens for this study. She argues that the influence of colonization establishes a system of patriarchal power that tends to suppress cultural and historical diversity. Western feminist discourse, she warns, often constructs the "Third World Woman," portraying women as victimized in feminist discourse. As a result, feminist discourse fails to perceive the diversity of women's experiences. These constructions might further marginalize local forms of agency and resistance. Manning (2021) extends this critique by noting that Western feminism tends to speak on behalf of Global South women, portraying them as homogenized spaces of "otherness," limiting their capacity for self-representation.

Maria Clara is also reminiscent of this tendency in a very complex form. Maria Clara is both fictional and has emerged to embody colonial and postcolonial notions of Filipina womanhood. This resonates with what Mohanty (2003) raises in her critique of colonial structures; she identifies homogenized expressions of women's identity that serve to establish dominance over races.

At the same time, Maria Clara is not merely a passive figure but an active character who plays a role in the story while she exists during her time. Critics such as Nick Joaquin have observed how she displays her capacity for moral action when she enters the convent to defy Padre Damaso and intervene in Ibarra and the friar's confrontation in *Noli Me Tangere* (Larrazabal, 2023). These episodes demonstrate that her power to act exists, but it is constrained rather than absent, shaped by the moral and religious frameworks available to women of her time.

Her connections with male authority figures through her relationship with Padre Damaso show how colonial power structures created restrictions for women who existed in a patriarchal society. Her ability to resist became less important than her restrictive behavior across later interpretations, which established her as an example of feminine restraint. The primary ways of interpreting the text now hide the precolonial representations of Filipinas who held both political and spiritual leadership positions, such as *mandirigma* and *babaylan*. In line with Mohanty (2003) and Manning (2021), this study opposes victim-centered frameworks by recovering narratives that foreground women's power and autonomy in culturally specific contexts.

Garcia (2013) further develops this critique of Maria Clara in the context of colonial discipline regarding Filipino identity. Garcia (2013) argues that Spanish colonizers brought Western frameworks of morality and sexuality, particularly the concept of *kalooban* (interiority), as defined by Catholic teachings. This process created a space where Filipinos were to internalize Western colonial standards of femininity and masculinity. This contributed to shaping ideals of womanhood that emphasized restraint, modesty, and moral supervision.

However, historical accounts suggest that women in precolonial Philippine society exercised relatively greater social and economic participation. According to Santiago (1997), the communal nature of precolonial Philippine economies (and thus sharing of responsibilities) did not create strict divisions of labor between men and women. In fact, in most of these communities, social organization emphasized collective contribution and reciprocity rather than strictly hierarchical gender roles.

Garcia (2009) further explains how colonial rule reinforced sexual hierarchies by privileging male authority and regulating female behavior. As a result, opposing dominant ideals associated with Maria Clara came to be viewed with suspicion, reflecting the persistence of colonial moral frameworks in cultural consciousness. Additionally, Garcia (2009) also illustrates how colonial discourses sexualized and pathologized practices, for instance,

through claims that sodomy was unknown prior to the arrival of Chinese migrants (*Sangleys*), a view shaped by both religious doctrine and xenophobic anxieties.

Furthermore, Garcia (2009) critiques colonial representation of *babaylanism*, reducing a highly complex spiritual and social role into an object of fear and control. Representations of *babaylanism* in colonial history contributed to the marginalization of indigenous gender systems and alternative forms of authority. Santiago (1997) supports this critique by observing that much Philippine historiography has been written from predominantly male perspectives, which often limited sustained attention to women's historical agency. Together, these critiques demonstrate how colonial and postcolonial knowledge production has produced dominant paradigms of gender and sexuality in the Philippines.

While Mohanty (2003) and Garcia (2009) expose the dangers of homogenization and colonial discipling, Mananzan (1999), on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of looking back at the Philippines' own indigenous roots, especially the tradition of gender complementarity. In her interview with Liwanag and Romero (2020), she points to the *babaylan* as proof that before colonization, women exercised spiritual and communal authority alongside figures such as *mandirigma*. This assertion is also adopted by Santiago (1997), which indicates that precolonial women were regarded as repositories of life, health, environment, and society because of their generative roles.

This could be further understood through Mananzan's (2016) broader scholarship. She explains that in many precolonial communities, women could own property, divorcing, and holding religious and political authority (Mananzan, 2016). However, these practices were gradually shifted under colonial rule because of the injection of Christian values and structures in the new systems. Under Christianity, women were required to be submissive and to embody the virtue of modesty. According to Mananzan (2016), such patriarchal values must be understood not as an essential component of the nature of the Filipino people but rather as a construct of history.

It follows that children's literature reflects broader social struggles over gender representation. Researchers have also noted that picture books and young adult stories tend to socialize children through norms that depict women as dependent, domestically oriented, or morally restrained. In the Philippine setting, these patterns have been linked with the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in traditional norms. Yet at the same time, folkloric and localized storytelling breaks out of the mold to provide ways of imagining as strong, independent, and powerful.

In light of these considerations, this study places Urduja and Abadeha as a counter-image to Maria Clara. Urduja, the legendary warrior princess, is portrayed exercising political authority, strategic leadership, and courage, qualities that contrast with the traditionally emphasized ideals of modesty and restraint. By positioning Urduja as a warrior-leader, the narrative recalls precolonial traditions in which women participated actively in governance and defense; it pushes against narrow ideas of what it means to be a Filipina, opening space for new possibilities.

Abadeha, on the other hand, is a Filipinized version of the Cinderella tale type that restates indigenous spirituality through its use of rituals, invocations, and divine intercessions. Abadeha, therefore, displays some aspects of the babaylan tradition, presenting Filipinas as spiritually strong and divinely empowered. Rather than perpetuating domestic passivity, her character assumes the precolonial figure of the priestess-healer whose authority emanates from spiritual knowledge and communal duties.

Urduja and Abadeha together present a challenge to the colonial system, which defines Filipina identity by reasserting the *mandirigma* and *babaylan* as complementary figures of agency and leadership.

While most research about Maria Clara discussed her as a product of colonial discourse, and while scholars such as Mohanty (2003), Garcia (2009), and Mananzan (2016) have critically examined the legacies of colonialism, relatively few studies have explored how *mandirigma* and *babaylan* figures in folklore and localized retellings function as counter-images to this archetype. This study addresses that gap by analyzing Urduja and Abadeha through a decolonial feminist lens, which shows their capability to transform cultural stories and children's books into platforms for fundamental equality and diverse representation.

Theoretical Framework

The review of related literature demonstrates how colonial archetypes and the partial marginalization of indigenous models of womanhood continue to exist. The present study uses the integration of Western, postcolonial, and Filipino feminist perspectives as its critical lens. It employs a layered theoretical framework that positions Filipino feminist discourse within both global and local contexts. The framework traces the development of ideas on women's equality from Eurocentric origins to decolonial and indigenous perspectives, which lead to the analysis of Urduja and Abadeha as counter-images. Urduja represents the political and martial agency of *mandirigma*, while Abadeha reflects the spiritual authority and resilience associated with the *babaylan*. The two characters show different ways in which women could express themselves through their connection to the precolonial and indigenous traditions.

Early feminist discourse is anchored in Mary Wollstonecraft's (1891) assertion that women possess the same intellectual capacity as men and that differences in behavior result largely from educational and social conditioning. This framework of feminism is recognized as the foundational thought, but it remains limited by its Eurocentric focus on European women's experiences and does not fully account for the historical experiences of colonized societies.

Beyond this universalism, Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques the way Western feminism tends to categorize "Third World women" into a single group that is largely characterized by victimization and passivity. Her work offers a critical lens through which

to examine how Maria Clara has been framed as a colonial archetype of the Filipina. Her work highlights the importance of paying attention to cultural and historical specificities.

Extending this perspective, Garcia (2009) places gender and sexuality within the context of Spanish colonial rule. He contends that Western standards of femininity, morality, and sexuality were imposed through the agency of colonial authority of the Catholic discourse of *kalooban* (interiority). These standards continue to affect modern Philippine society (Garcia, 2009, 2013). The analysis reveals the impacts of colonial rule on the marginalization of the indigenous gender systems.

This framework is grounded in the decolonial feminist principles of Mananzan (2016). She critiques the Maria Clara ideals as the colonial construct that impeded women's social and spiritual integrity by embracing the pre-colonized concept of being a *mandirigma* and a *babaylan*. More specifically, Mananzan (2016) adds that colonial and patriarchal discourse, rooted in moral unprotectedness and weakness, sought to capitalize on the exploitation of women's bodies. Furthermore, she calls for the retrieval of physical dignity and the development of a wholesome spirituality that touches on the holy, the emotional, and the physical.

By focusing on ritual practices like dancing and bodily-oriented prayer, Mananzan (1999) emphasizes performative and community-based practices as constitutive of freedom, subversion, and communal validation. Such approaches refashion or rewrite the very image of women from one of silence and marginality to one of agency, survival, and power through relationships. This perspective, therefore, facilitates the revival of egalitarian traditions that colonial patriarchy had undermined.

These theoretical perspectives provide a multi-layered lens for analyzing Urduja and Abadeha as alternative constructions of Filipina identity. Integrating Western feminist foundations, postcolonial critique, and indigenous feminist thought allows this framework for a nuanced reading of how *mandirigma* and *babaylan* figures function as counter-images within historical, cultural, and literary contexts.

Methodology

Filipinos have long considered Maria Clara an archetype of a Filipina, often associated with someone who exudes refinement, religiosity, modesty, and obedience. This image emerged within specific historical contexts, and it has also contributed to persisting cultural expectations that tend to obscure the more complex realities of precolonial and indigenous womanhood. To present other images of Filipina agency, the present work examines two texts: the legend of Urduja as represented in oral tradition and in historical narratives and Abadeha, a Filipinized version of Cinderella by Maria delos Angeles de la Paz (2001). The legend of Urduja enacts the Filipina as a warrior and political leader, while Abadeha, though a retelling rather than an

indigenous narrative, reflects indigenous spiritual traditions, indigenous names, and indigenous religious practices.

The presence of Abadeha needs to be justified. When De la Paz (2001) chose to offer her version of the story, she considered her act “another attempt at contributing to the preservation of Filipino folk traditions that unfortunately seem to be dying out.” The local adaptation of a Western folk tale, with hues of plants, rituals, animals, and indigenous beliefs, deeply embeds values of respecting one’s ancestors, having faith in *Bathala*, and revering nature gods. These elements are significant components of the cosmology and lifestyles that existed in precolonial times in the Philippines. Abadeha, then, can be considered an opportunity to rebuild Filipina identity in terms of exhibiting aspects of strength, spirituality, and community sensibilities that translate to empowerment. The research is also aligned with the overall purpose of exploring how indigenous or indigenized narratives embody counter-images to colonial or Western archetypes. Moreover, offering indigenous or indigenized narratives in children’s literature helps to present counter-images of womanhood.

For the purpose of data analysis, the research used reflexive thematic analysis as a data analysis method according to Braun and Clarke’s (2006; 2013) suggested parameters. Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen because it is flexible and allows the researcher to interpret the data. It also allowed the researcher to actively engage with both the literal and cultural-ideological manifestations of the texts being examined. Reflexive thematic analysis is applicable for the analysis of literary and folktale texts in terms of the manifestation or construction of other Filipina identities.

Phase 1: Familiarization

The stories of Urduja and Abadeha were read and re-read to obtain in-depth familiarity with the content as well as the context of the stories. Analytical notes were generated to show the overall impressions, character roles, symbols, context, and emotional content of the stories.

Similarly, with regard to Urduja, the notes pointed out her image as a brave and intelligent warrior-leader, which both men and women esteem, and as a character who defies colonial stereotypes of “barbaric” Filipinos. In terms of Abadeha, memos pointed out her image of agility, her image as someone who interceded with *Bathala* and spirits, and her image as a healer. These are images that resonated with the character of the babaylan, not Cinderella.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Line-by-line coding was conducted to identify meaningful segments related to gender, authority, spirituality, and agency in the narratives. Each segment was examined in relation to the study’s theoretical framework, particularly Mohanty’s (2003) critique of

homogenization, Garcia's analysis of colonial disciplining (2009; 2013), and Mananzan's (1999; 2016) emphasis on indigenous authority. This guided the development of initial codes that reflected both explicit textual features and underlying cultural meanings.

Table 1

Line-by-line coding of the folktales, generating initial code

Segment / Quote	Initial Code(s)	Source	Reflexive Note
"Princess Urduja was reputed to be a good warrior... her retinue consisted of women skilled in arms."	Female leadership; Warrior agency	Urduja	Aligns with research goal (<i>mandirigma</i>). Must avoid romanticizing as unique rather than systemic.
"I will marry only the man who can defeat me... she remained unmarried all her life."	Marriage as battleground: Female autonomy	Urduja	Risk of Eurocentric reading (resistance vs. patriarchy). Need to ask if this reflects complementarity or imposed dichotomy.
"She invited the ship's crew to a banquet... she talked to the visitor in Arabian."	Diplomacy; Cultural sophistication	Urduja	Counters colonial stereotype of "barbarian." Highlights global literacy.
"Abadeha prayed: <i>Bathala</i> , Creator of Earth, Anitos, Spirits of my ancestors..."	Indigenous spirituality; Ancestral connection	Abadeha	Strong link to RRL (Mananzan, Garcia). Must frame as agency, not superstition.
"She was tasked to wash handkerchiefs... impossible tasks made possible by spirits."	Resilience; Spiritual intercession	Abadeha	Obedience could be read as passivity. Better: endurance + reward by ancestors.
"Only Abadeha could heal the prince's finger swelling."	Healing power; Agency through care	Abadeha	Abadeha as a savior figure, not a passive bride.
"A <i>babaylan</i> priest-healer was first called... but couldn't."	<i>Babaylan</i> authority; Colonial reduction of role	Abadeha	Must note colonial framing ("priest-healer"). Supports Garcia's claim on <i>babaylan</i> gender fluidity.
"Abadeha and Prince shared their happiness and wealth with the people..."	Indigenous governance; Harmony in leadership	Abadeha	Prince is unnamed, suggesting Abadeha's co-rule. Counters the colonial image of barbarity.

Table 1 shows the coding process produced both brief, descriptive codes and interpretive codes. For instance, Urduja can be examined through themes such as warrior

agency, female autonomy, and diplomatic practice, while Abadeha can be examined through spiritual intercession, healing power, and forms of indigenous governance. Reflexive notes were kept with each code to reduce the risk of reading Abadeha's endurance as passive obedience.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

The initial codes were reviewed, searching for recurring patterns and related ideas, then grouped into broader thematic categories. In the case of Urduja, three themes emerged: Political and Martial Agency, Indigenous Sovereignty and Diplomacy, and Gender Complementarity and Tension. For Abadeha, the analysis focuses on three themes: Spiritual Resilience and Ancestral Power, *Babaylanic* Authority and Healing Justice, and Egalitarian Leadership and Communal Harmony.

In both narratives, a shared theme was identified: Reclaiming Precolonial Egalitarian Traditions. This theme was based on repeated portrayals of characters, rituals, symbols, and social practices in the texts.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

During this phase, candidate themes were reviewed for internal coherence and the distinction of the categories within the themes. In addition, the codes within each theme were reviewed for internal homogeneity, and the possibility of any overlaps among the themes was reviewed to ensure that the themes remained conceptually distinct from each other.

For example, cross-cutting codes such as those relating to leadership/governance were critically examined to eliminate redundancy. Meanwhile, different aspects of agency, such as martial leadership found in Urduja and spiritual leadership found in Abadeha, were maintained as separate codes. This review exercise verified that the thematic codes corresponded well with the data set while at the same time adhering to its purpose of exploring the alternative concept of Filipina identity.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

The themes were developed to refer to cohesive analytical concepts, a process that involved refinement. Urduja was constructed to embody the Filipina Mandirigma, highlighting political and martial competencies. Abadeha was also developed to refer to the Filipina Babaylan, highlighting spirituality and healing.

These two roles also intersect as what can be called alternative models of Filipina identity, and they collectively carry out the overarching theme of Reclaiming Precolonial Egalitarian Traditions. Each theme was articulated in relation to the study's theoretical framework and supported by textual evidence.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The last phase was about weaving the improved themes into a workable analytical narrative with supporting quotations from texts. The analysis extended beyond description to interpretation with reference to the framework of decolonial feminism.

Reflexivity

In this paper, the researcher explores how Filipina identity remains steeped in colonial ideas of womanhood while also recovering narratives of precolonial and indigenous traditions of gender complementarity. Such a position informed the analytical focus on such themes as leadership, resilience, and spirituality. Yet, the study kept in check the limits of Eurocentric feminist frames that have oftentimes framed women in opposition to men, and the tendency to romanticize figures from the precolonial period.

To ensure that there is analytic transparency in the research process, the reflexive strategies were adopted. These include annotations and noting in Phase 1 coding and Phase 2 coding. These were intended to ensure that the data are not overanalyzed through personal research biases. To ensure that personal research biases do not affect the analysis of the data, reflexive strategies ensure that there is transparency in the research analysis process. These include annotations and noting in Phase 1 and Phase 2 coding. Braun and Clarke (2006) argued in their principles of reflexive thematic analysis that recognizing the researcher's interpretative role is essential in establishing the rigor or reliability of the findings.

Results and Discussion

This part will demonstrate the outcome of the reflexive thematic analysis of the narratives of Urduja and Abadeha. For Urduja, the outcome of the analysis revealed the following three clustered themes: political and martial agency, indigenous sovereignty and diplomacy, and gender complementarity. For Abadeha, the analysis established the following themes: spiritual resilience, babaylanic healing power, and communal harmony. Collectively, these thematic clusters illustrate how both narratives form alternative models of Filipina agency that differ from dominant colonial representations.

Figure 1.
Identified Clustered Themes

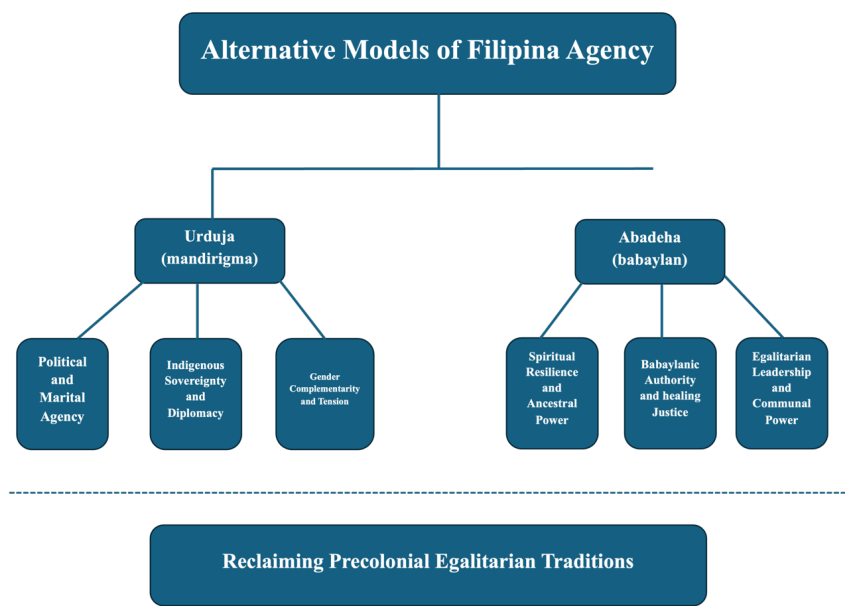


Figure 1 shows how themes were identified from the coding process. In the story of Urduja, the themes stress her role as a political leader, her martial prowess, and her ability to govern with both men and women. For Abadeha, the main themes are spiritual intercession, healing authority, and participation in communal life. While Maria Clara has often been linked to Marian devotion and ideals of obedience and faith, these traits have been interpreted through colonial lenses as signs of empowerment grounded in indigenous belief systems. These themes point to a view of social relation based on complementarity and shared authority, challenging the patriarchal structures reinforced during colonization.

Political and Martial Agency (Urduja)

The representation of Urduja is a pronounced contrast to the image of Filipina womanhood that colonialism established. In the account, she is said to be “a good warrior...with women skilled in arms.” The story, therefore, reveals the broad variety of social and political positions that women had in pre-colonial society. The political leadership and command that Urduja held are a clear indication of the respect accorded to Filipina womanhood.

This portrayal counters the “historically entrenched” Maria Clara stereotype described by Hau 2021, which is built into legal and cultural discourse, where the credibility of women has time and again been measured against ideals of purity and submissiveness. These frameworks often presented images of Filipinas as victims. In contrast, Urduja presented autonomy and leadership, presenting an alternative historical model of female agency.

Urduja reinforces her autonomy with her declaration, “I will marry only the man who can defeat me.” This declaration shows some measure of agency in marriage choices. While Urduja’s conditions reflect rejection of marriage in a way, they also seem to reflect her resolute stance on marriage with someone of equal competence. By contrast, in Maria Clara’s marriage to Ibarra, her relationship was circumscribed by the patriarchal Padre Damaso.

The cultural refinement of Urduja also contributes to her political potency. Aside from the narrative about her proficiency in Arabic, there is also a mention of her communication with a foreign visitor like Ibn Batuta (Del Castillo y Tuazon, 1969). This perception of Urduja questions the idea of Filipinos as “barbaric indio” in colonial history, reinforcing the fact that pre-colonial society was generally literate. Even the assertion made by Garcia (2013) that colonial history obscured indigenous models of political potency has been circumvented by the return to the history of Urduja.

Despite the respects in which Urduja represents political/military leadership, the figure of Abadeha serves to describe the alternative uses of tenacity and spirituality as a source of power.

Spiritual Resilience and *Babaylanic* Power (Abadeha)

Colonial authorities often treated indigenous religious practices as pagan or primitive and used them to justify their control and intervention. In contrast, the narrative of Abadeha highlights spirituality as a legitimate form of agency. When Abadeha prays, “Bathala, Creator of Earth, Anitos, Spirits of my ancestors, hear me and help me,” she invokes a cosmology in which women play an active role in mediating between the spiritual forces and the social worlds. This aligns her with the *babaylan*, the priestess-healers who held authority in both spiritual practice and community life (Liwanag & Romero, 2020; Mananzan, 1999).

Abadeha’s resilience is underscored by tasks presented as impossible, such as turning a black handkerchief white or reweaving a ruined mat, which are completed through ancestral intervention. These scenarios should not be read as passive obedience; instead, they show endurance grounded in ancestral justice. Healing the prince’s swollen finger, she is framed as an agent of restoration rather than a passive recipient of rescue.

Garcia (2009; 2013) argues that colonial records cast *babaylan* mainly as priest-healers, which minimized their political and cultural authority. Abadeha’s story resists this narrow viewing by reaffirming spirituality as a central source of power. In this way, it also responds to Mohanty’s (2003) critique of Western feminist discourse, which often presents Global South women as powerless victims. Abadeha represents resilience and self-determination rooted in indigenous traditions rather than imposed colonial categories.

Egalitarian Leadership and Communal Harmony

Urduja and Abadeha present leadership as a shared practice that depends on cooperation and mutual respect. Urduja governs with the counsel of both men and women and leads warriors of both sexes. After her marriage, Abadeha shares prosperity with her community: “They enjoyed a long life of harmony, peace, and love.” In both narratives, leadership is framed as serving the group’s welfare rather than exercising control over others.

Santiago (1996) asserts that Filipino society in the precolonial times defined people’s roles according to their contributions regardless of gender. The same is true in the primacy of shared prosperity in both texts. Mananzan (1999) likewise believes that the *babaylan* and *mandirigma* served as evidence of an equal social order that was disrupted by colonial rule.

By depicting balanced gender relations, these stories contrast with later colonial narratives that establish a hierarchy in gender relations. They highlight complementarity as an intrinsic element of indigenous social organization.

The Alternative Models of Filipina Agency

The enduring influence of Maria Clara is brought into question when alternative portrayals, such as Urduja and Abadeha, come into the picture. Maria Clara has often been framed and associated with ideals of purity, restraint, and moral virtue (Hau, 2020), born from contexts of colonial and religious credo. Yet recent scholarship also points out her moments of courage and moral agency. Recognizing such complexity allows for a more careful and detailed comparison.

In this context, Urduja signifies power, independence, and diplomacy, while Abadeha signifies spiritual perseverance, justice as healing, and social responsibility. Together, they provide us with multidimensional portraits of Filipina power that go beyond traditional notions of submissiveness and victimhood.

Where Maria Clara’s compliance was seen to accept and acquiesce to patriarchal domination, Abadeha’s compliance was seen in the context of religious practice, offering a spiritual orientation for protection and empowerment to be obtained. Maria Clara’s silence was a function of the realities in the colonial world; Urduja’s was a sign of her political legitimacy and wisdom. Rather than diminishing the important history of Maria Clara, these other representations offer similar avenues for expressing Filipina identity.

The contrasting roles of the *babaylan/s* and *mandirigma* challenge stereotypical ideas about Filipino women by showing how spiritual leadership and physical leadership can coexist under the same tradition. In this context, agency encompasses both political leadership and spiritual authority, which are beneficial for decolonizing scholarship; however, they can also contribute to cultural foregrounding through literature and education that fosters cultural renewal in various ways, as these stories offer alternative ways of being for young readers.

Implications

Philippine folktales provide strong alternatives to the dominant archetypes of Maria Clara, who, though culturally and historically significant, has often been interpreted through the lens of ideal purity and submission. Narratives like Urduja and Abadeha uncover local traditions where women possess political authority, spiritual power, and community leadership roles in the society. These stories note the egalitarian values in precolonial society and serve to broaden understandings of Filipina agency.

The integration of such folktales into children's literature and pedagogical frameworks may serve to present young readers with varied models of femininity and leadership. Mananzan (1999) and Santiago (1996) contend that precolonial society viewed gender roles as complementary. As Mohanty (2003) reminds us, there is the danger of regarding women as universally oppressed. Given this context, presenting Urduja and Abadeha as alternative models of Filipina identity responds not only to scholarly imperatives but also to practical ones. This helps to counter debilitating stereotypes, furthers cultural preservation, and promotes a vision of equality that is more anchored to the local history and indigenes.

Conclusion

This article seeks to analyze the narratives of Urduja and Abadeha through the decolonial feminist lens and attempts to deconstruct the dominant colonial images of Filipina identity. The article presents three significant findings. The role of Urduja in politics and war is an instance of women exercising self-determination and leadership, refuting the restrictive colonial ideals of women. Abadeha's spiritual tenacity and ability to heal reinforce the argument that indigenous belief systems could form the basis of women exercising authority. Both Urduja and Abadeha exemplify gender relations that emphasize complementarity as opposed to subordination.

Together, these stories act as counter-narratives to Maria Clara and extend the scope of existing academic discussions on Filipina identity beyond the boundaries of singular, monochromatic models. This research acknowledges its limitations. Abadeha, while existing as a reconstructed narrative rather than an original pre-colonial text, and stories surrounding Urduja, necessarily filtered through historical and colonial movements, these stories must necessarily be seen as interpretive arenas through which Filipina identity can be renegotiated.

These limits notwithstanding, the research makes valuable contributions. At the center of the discussion are the Filipina figures beyond the Maria Clara model, challenging the long-standing patriarchal stereotype in literary and cultural discourse. It is in promoting Filipino folktales that demonstrate warrior and *babaylanic* agency that we can enrich curricula and widen what students read and thus provide them with an alternative model of womanhood, thereby supporting a more egalitarian vision of gender roles. Furthermore, while recognizing Maria Clara's historical and literary importance, considering other archetypes, the study will develop a more balanced and pluralistic

conception of Filipina identity, one that resists colonial reduction and recovers the diversity of precolonial traditions.

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Bionote

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