AIMS For a better birth...

Birth and family traditions in Fiji

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By Siteri Tui Kurewaka; compiled by Luisa Izzi



Siteri dressed in traditional Fijian attire, wearing the Masi (printed bark-tree cloth) and the Tabua (whale's tooth).

Introductory note from the Editor:

Siteri is a proud Fijian living in Scotland. She has three children, who were born in England, Germany and Scotland. Her husband, also from Fiji, serves in the British Armed Forces, and this is the reason why they moved from Fiji, first to Germany and then to Scotland.

There is a community of thousands of Fijians in the UK. Usually, there is a "Fiji Day Gathering" in October at the same time as the Fijian Independence Day, where Fijians from all over the UK gather with lots of other guests, coming to taste the food, experience the culture, see the dancing. Last year, there was supposed to be a celebration in the Highlands because there are several regiments with members of the Fijian community there: the Black Watch at Fort George, and more in Kinloss and Elgin.

I have never met Siteri in person, but we are both part of a local bilingual families group and we have some friends in common. When researching the theme for this issue of the AIMS Journal, I remembered this lovely lady

from such a distant and different part of the world living in this small, rural area of Scotland, and I thought it would be wonderful to have a conversation with her about something as special as pregnancy and birth and the traditions of her family and her culture. Our conversation was emotional at times, but it was also joyous in how she shared special aspects of her culture, creating opportunities for our readers to learn about a place of which they probably have very little knowledge.

This piece is the result of our conversation.

Luisa: Food is an important part of any culture. Is there anything special about food in Fiji that relates to being pregnant or being a mother?

Siteri: There is no particular food that you need to eat, it is just the same advice that the midwives would give us, to eat healthy, balanced meals. We are so fortunate in Fiji, we've got lots of greenery around us and processed food is limited, so there's lots of crops and fresh vegetables. Organic living is a must! Our grandmothers advise us to eat healthy food, lots of greens, that is basically it. There is no particular food that you need to stop eating or not eat, even seafood, I love my seafood! Coming from the Pacific, we love fish and prawns. When I was 5 months pregnant with my youngest child, I had a talk (with the midwife?) because I saw these pamphlets that said you are not allowed to eat shellfish, so I asked and I was quite curious about that, and I thought it was quite unfortunate for me, I love to eat prawns, I love my crabs! But then, well, that was it, I was not able to eat seafood and fresh fish. If I was in Fiji, you would not be limited in anything, you are allowed to eat anything, as long as it's fresh and healthy, that's it.

Luisa: And is there any tradition or any words, or anything that family would do for you when you're pregnant? When you think about a woman in Fiji who is expecting a baby or has just had a baby, is there anything in particular that comes to mind that would happen in Fiji or that family would do?

Siteri: The birth of a baby in Fiji is a big thing. It's all the family, nuclear family and extended family. I am trying to compare both worlds, Fiji and here, and I miss home, I miss getting pampered. Back home you have a big feast, the men go out to sea to go fishing and they get really fresh fish for you in a bundle, root-crops are harvested and then they all will make a feast. There is something we call "earth-oven food", where you dig up the ground and then you roast pork or chicken, it's a special meal. We have a traditional mat called *Ibe*. Before the baby is born, the grandmothers will be weaving the mats, knitting nice pillows, getting ready with all the special things. The mum is not allowed to do anything, she is like a queen! She sits down, everyone makes sure that she is not tired, her legs get massaged. Mothers are treated in a special and delicate manner. When the baby is born, your grandmother, your mum, from both sides of the family, they all go to the hospital, there's a whole lot of people there with the mother, not only your husband! That is allowed in Fiji. Once the baby is born, even before mum holds the baby, we use a special *Masi*, a type of cloth made from the bark-tree which is printed and is part of our heritage. We are well known for using *Masi* on occasions like marriages or deaths, or any special events, or the birth of a baby! When the nurse gets the baby out, they're going to clean the baby and then, before he's been given back to the mum, the baby is wrapped in the *Masi*. All the family is there, wrapping the *Masi* over the clothes, it's a special gift, and then they will all hold the baby and pass the baby around, it's a very special

occasion! And a happy occasion as well, because of the birth of a new baby.

After that, the mum gets better in the hospital, maybe for a few days, and then they will all go home together. Once they're home, the mum is not allowed to sit down and eat her food, because she could still be in pain, she's not deemed ready to sit properly at a table and eat. She's to lie down on the pillows and then it's the grandmothers who feed her. The mother only feeds her baby. The bathing of the baby, or when the baby cries, singing lullabies, all the grandmothers do that for four nights, called*Bogi Va* (four nights).

It is also very important that we don't lose the umbilical cord: sometimes it goes missing in the hospital, but it's very important to us because that umbilical cord will be planted! So the grandmothers will be carrying the baby, singing chants, Fijian lullabies, and once it falls off and the baby is strong enough, they will give a big scream and they will be so happy! They will wrap the umbilical cord in a piece of*Masi* and they will allocate a special day for the ceremony. When I was born – I am the eldest in my family – my umbilical cord was planted under an orange tree! So that tree is my age. Any plant that the parents would love to have for their child can be chosen. Unfortunately, I lost my son's umbilical cord back in Germany, but I sent my daughter's back home, and for my youngest son I wasn't able to send it yet because of the Coronavirus!

It is our belief that if the umbilical cord is not planted, the children will grow up to be very cheeky and very naughty, not stable in life. So that umbilical cord represents the fact that the children are strong, rooted, solid and stable.

Luisa: That is wonderful, it's making me emotional! No wonder these kinds of memories are making you emotional, too! This is obviously a way in which you kept these cultural traditions alive for your children, even if they were not born in Fiji.

So, your first child was born in Germany?

Siteri: No, my first child was born in England. We were living in Germany at the time, but my husband was deployed to Afghanistan, and I was alone, new to a foreign country and pregnant. There were other Fijian families around, but I wanted my family close. My brother lives in England – he used to be in the Army as well – so I was able to travel to the UK via a special route provided by the Army. I travelled when I was 5 months pregnant, and once there I tried to get registered with a midwife and bring my stuff across. We knew we were going to have a girl, and I really wanted my mum around. I had to keep telling myself, "You need to be strong. You're in a foreign country, but you chose to come here". So I tried to adapt and to go with the flow; it was no use trying to think back to those special moments.

One day, I came back from the hospital where I had gone for a check-up, and I had a call from Afghanistan; my husband had been shot. I sat down, I was crying; my brother and my sister-in-law ran up and I just handed the phone to them. It was the Sergeant Major, one of my husband's bosses. The Americans had taken him to their base to get treated. Little did they know that I was 8 months pregnant! And my husband was lying down with his injuries and was trying to tell his bosses, "Please, don't tell my wife! I

need to speak to my wife!" It was a miscommunication at that point. I had high blood pressure, I was shaking, I was nervous, my mind was just completely racing. I was shattered, really, out of control. Luckily the nurse came in to check the baby, and baby was fine! My daughter was a happy, bubbly baby, everything with her was just fine; it was me, I needed to be cared for.

They flew my husband to Queen Elizabeth's Hospital in Birmingham, where he stayed for two weeks, and I was able to go and stay close to him for those two weeks. As I walked into the ICU, all the nurses realized that I was heavily pregnant, they were so shocked! And the Colonel was so terribly sorry that they didn't know I was pregnant, as they could have delayed the message. They did apologize. I always think of that, I really had a hard time. It took my husband some time to recover.

With my daughter, I had planned for a water birth at Salisbury Hospital, everything was decided, but I was rushed there in an ambulance in the morning and I was told by a nurse that the pool was on maintenance, and I thought, "Really? I had planned this with the doctors and the nurses, why is this happening now? Why didn't anyone tell me?" My husband was with me and he tried to comfort me, but I was very stressed and quite worried, really. My water broke back at the house and there was meconium in it, which is why it was an emergency. I never thought I would end up with a c-section, I never planned for it, but things happen and they kept telling me I would be fine. Even my dad called from Fiji to talk to me and help me make a decision! So I agreed, and my daughter was born at 10pm. My second child was also born by emergency c-section and my youngest was born by planned c-section.

Luisa: When you were talking about all those beautiful traditions in Fiji for the birth of a baby, did you ever take part in any of those ceremonies when you were still living in Fiji?

Siteri: No. Those traditions belong mostly to our aunties and grandmothers, to the older generations. I could maybe have helped to look after the little ones, but I wasn't really taking part. But we know what's important, and I have seen it as well. Actually, my brother's wife, she gave birth when we were in Fiji and I was twenty-something, and I took part as well, I was in the kitchen, helping out with the cooking! We were at home, so my sister-in-law's family, her mum, her auntie and her dad, came over, both sets of grandparents and great-aunts from our side. They were all there, so we had the event at home. My nephew was the first grandson, so it was really very special.

Luisa: So, you participated as a member of the extended family, but because you were not the right age or the right generation, you were not one of the people performing the ceremony.

Your first child was born in England, and then you went back to Germany and you had your second child there?

Siteri: Yes. When I came back from the hospital (after having my second baby), I was really depressed. Straight after the birth of my son, my husband was deployed again. I tried to ask him if they could postpone it, because I had just had a baby, but he had to go, it's the way it is with his work. So I had to step up and do things that – had I been back in Fiji – I would not have had to do, like grocery shopping and cooking. I remember pushing the buggy up to our flat on the fourth floor, with the groceries and the baby,

all the time crying to my mum on the phone, telling her that I missed home and I wished I was back at home. It was a really hard time and I had to adapt.

And then in 2015, before we came to Scotland, we travelled to Fiji, and that was the first time we took our two older kids to Fiji. On this occasion, we had another special ceremony: it's called the *Kaumatanigone* and it's the first time that they meet their grandparents, visit their native land, and see family. A big traditional feast was prepared. Once we arrived at the airport, I couldn't go to my family: I needed to go to my in-laws first for a few days. A very special element in this ceremony is a whale's tooth, a *Tabua*. This is a very important thing, a prized possession in any Fijian family: if you don't have money, but you have a whale's tooth, then you are considered a rich person, rich in your heritage.

The families gather all these special things, the food and the mats and the whale's tooth, maybe the men will go fishing, and there is also a special crop called Dalo which is gathered in bundles. We all got together with all the things we gathered and then we presented our children – my daughter's name is Hannah and she was 5 and a half at the time, and my son's name is Sebastian Jr and he was 3 and a half – to my husband's family. He is from the coastal side of Fiji, while I live inland, so we then all travelled to my village, where my family had also prepared a big feast with all the traditional elements. They were all waiting for us. Once we got out of the car, the children were not supposed to step on the ground, so all the aunties came and carried the kids, all wrapped in fine fabrics, and presented them to my parents and grandparents. The children were each wearing a *Tabua*, a whale's tooth, and my father took that off and gave them a new one; it's an exchange, a passage.



Siteri and her children during the Kaumatanigone. You can see the Ibe (traditional woven mats) and the bales of fine fabric and Masi (traditional printed bark-tree cloth).

My children were very confused! My son was crying, probably because of all these people carrying him and the fact that he was wrapped in all the fabric, while my daughter was just shy, wondering where all these people had come from, who they were, and hiding in my dad's shirt. When we were sitting under the *Vatuniloa* (Fijian tent), all these people were staring at the children: it's bad manners here! But my family, they were so happy and so eager to look at them. And then it was official, my kids could come

home to my family. At that point, my in-laws could go back to their house and I could stay with my family, because we had performed this rite of passage. If I hadn't done that and I had decided to go straight to my family from the airport, I would have been considered very rude, and I would have brought shame on my family. I enjoyed taking part in the *Kaumatanigone*, it is part of my heritage, and also how we show affection and care for each other.



Siteri and her son Sebastian Jr during the Kaumatanigone. He is holding a Tabua in the form of a garland and is all wrapped up in fine Masi. This picture was taken before Siteri's sisters came and took him to be presented to my Dad and Grand-aunt or Grandmother (whoever is the most senior in the family are the ones that the children will be presented to). Then they took off all the traditional attire that he was wearing and in return dressed him up in a similar fashion but from their side of the family.

My mum had actually met my children before; she came to Germany when I had my son, to provide support. She arrived the day after he was born and stayed for three months: it was the sweetest three months ever! I got treated to lovely food, my mum's cooking, getting good massages as well, she taught me how to bathe the baby, and all that. The fact that my mum was there with me made my experience so much better than the first time.

My mum was around when I was pregnant with my youngest son as well, but she couldn't cope with the Scottish weather and so she decided to go back to Fiji at the beginning of January 2020 and was planning to come back to Scotland in the summer. I gave birth a few weeks after she left, and then of course Covid and the lockdown happened. My mum actually thought she'd made a good decision because she wouldn't have been able to cope with the weather and lockdown in Scotland! And my third birth was a really good birth because I had planned it and everything just happened at the right time.

When I had my boy in Germany, the big barrier was the language: I could only use gestures or use my phone and Google Translate. When they took me to the theatre, I thought the injection they had given

me had not made me numb enough, so I gave a terrible scream, and they gave me a different shot and I felt really woozy and dizzy. I couldn't have any skin-to-skin with my two older children, because after birth I had to go to a separate ward to be checked until the medications were out of my system, so my husband was the lucky one! I was pleased with my last birth: I had a spinal anaesthesia so I was awake, I opted to listen to classical music, my husband was there, I could see everything around me and they explained things to me, everything went according to plan. The midwives were lovely, they understood my culture as well. In Fiji, after a baby is born, we believe the mum needs to eat nutritious food, fish and meat, proteins to help with breastfeeding, and when I saw the food in the hospital, the sandwiches, oh my! There was this lovely midwife and she was very interested in where I was from, my culture and what I loved eating, and when I told her that my husband was going to cook and bring me a pot of fish from home, she asked me if she could try it as well! So I shared it with her and she loved it, red snapper in coconut milk (unfortunately there's no coconut trees in Scotland, so we had to make do with tins from Aldi)! That in itself made me feel so proud, I felt noticed not just as a mum, but they saw me as a unique person, and I got to share my culture as well. It was really special, it was such a small thing, but it made a big difference to me. The fact that I was breastfeeding as well was really positive. I breastfed all my three children, I am a big believer in breastfeeding, and I promote it on my Instagram as well, I have always enjoyed it!

We don't do baby showers in Fiji, but after the baby is born and the mother goes home there is a time called *Roqoroqo*. We don't receive visits straight away; people wait for the mum to be strong enough, maybe three weeks or a month. Some people may experience feelings of abandonment or separation, but friends and family know that you are there, they are just giving some time for the mum to heal and rest, and then when they finally come it is another celebration! They will bring food and gifts and the*Masi* as well, the bark-tree cloth. We always present the*Masi* to friends and family, or receive it as a gift. And when visitors hold the baby for the first time, they will first wrap them in the bark cloth.

Luisa: One last question. You mentioned that in Germany you had some issues with the language, while in Scotland you felt a lot more confident and appreciated and seen as a unique person with your own traditions and culture. Is there anything else that happened when you had your babies that you think had to do with where you came from? Is there anything in the way that you were treated or the way in which they gave you information that made you feel different, or made you think that the reason why that was happening was that you were different or "foreign"?

Siteri: Right, I get your question. Not at all. I remember when my mum came (to Germany) and I was still in hospital after my c-section, I happened to have this midwife, an older German lady, and I remember that – maybe because of her age or mindset – she seemed so curious about me and wanted to know more about me. I had to introduce my mum to her and I said, "Mama", and I tried to explain that she had come from Fiji, very far away, and I was miming and using gestures, and all the time she was nodding and seemed very touched. She went to my mum and kept patting her on the back, and she had tears in her eyes. I wondered if maybe she was a mum herself and she was thinking about her own daughter. It was a special feeling. Even though we didn't speak the same language, the midwife could really relate to us, she

could see me and my mum and our relationship. Everything became understandable, even though we couldn't technically understand each other.

At times I felt reluctant because of the colour of my skin, or concerned because I felt new and worried I couldn't understand the questions or the language, but I never felt the need to explain myself, and I always managed to establish a connection with people.