

Kinship

By Lia Pa'apa'a

The work I do personally and professionally as a mama and an artist is about connecting to Kin. It is about connecting to family and community. It is about connecting to our other than human kin. It is about connecting across oceans and time.

My kinship positions me in the world. It connects me to my ancestors and descendants, it connects me to lands across the great Pacific Ocean and it connects me to my relatives of different species.

Kin to me is not just about human connection, but also to that of animals, plants, weather systems and land. My connections to these kin are what creates my sense of belonging, purpose and responsibility. My kinship helps to guide me in the world. It grounds me with humility and purpose and drives me to do better and advocate for those who cannot.

My relationship to my Kin has helped me to create strong holistic foundations that support me, my family and my community. It has guided my arts and cultural practice as well as my mental, emotional, spiritual and physical wellbeing.

I work with mamas during the first 1000 days with their baby. This is the sacred and rapidly changing time from conception to the age of two. We know now that a baby's brain develops more during those first 1000 days than any other time of their life. We also know this is one of the biggest times of transition, growth and sometimes stress for new mothers.

This work is in response to my own experience when I had my now four year old Temét. I felt isolated, exhausted and yearned for family and cultural practices to mark what was the biggest emotional and spiritual transition of my adult life. I soon felt a whisper from my ancestors that this is not how it is meant to be, that there were old ways that supported, nurtured and uplifted Mama and baby during this time. This began a deep dive in the lonely hours of the night during breastfeeding to learn more about different the cultural practices that my kin had done.

As an Indigenous woman of colour my cultural identity and connection has always been a central part to who I am. Because of this my partner and I decided to raise both our babies on the ancestral lands of their father- a proud Yidinji and Meriam man, and for this I am grateful. This was a deliberate decision to connect them to their country and community. This did make me contemplate however how I would keep my babies connected to my own cultures and ancestors. I knew they would identify as proud Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders but I wanted to ensure they also knew their Samoan and Luiseño heritage and feel connected to them. I am a first generation born Australian. My mother made sure I knew my Samoan heritage and later in life I was able to go back to California and connect more heavily with my Native side as well. With both my Grandmas still alive I have had direct links to stories, experiences and their presence. If this isn't to be the case for my sons, I felt the great urge of responsibility to ensure they were still connected to their stories, and ways of being. I felt I needed to do this in a meaningful and everyday way that was not conceptual or abstract. I needed more than ever to live my culture on a daily basis so my children would grow up with their cultural practices. I wanted my family to have embedded ways of being and walking in the world that connects them to their kin across the oceans and throughout their lineage. In order to achieve this I have and continue to research through family interviews, readings and seek out others on the same path.

Māori talk about the Te Here Tangata which translates to The Rope of Mankind- a rope we are part of that has our ancestors to one side of us and our descendants on the other. Native Americans live by the lore of honouring the 7 generations before and after you.

Positioning yourself on this continuum comes with a sense of place, purpose, community and kinship that transcends time. It also comes with a sense of responsibility and a system in which to conduct yourself. This connection to ancestors allows me to contemplate and utilise the old ways in order to find harmony in the present and hope for the future. By being connected on the continuum of kin I get a great sense of being held and supported by my old people. I work hard to do them proud in the way I engage myself. I draw from their strengths of survival, resilience, adaptability and grace. I bring their teachings into my contemporary life and walk proudly in my identity as a pan-Pacific Indigenous woman.

Another fundamental daily practice I have to connect to my Kin is I eat a plant based diet. I feel this connects me to my culture rather than removes it as some may think. I believe that to honour my kin I cannot participate in a system that destroys so much habitat and also treats our animal kin with such lack of respect. Being plant based drastically reduces my footprint on the earth, something I know my ancestors did. It also unexpectedly has given me a deep feeling of connection to animals, knowing I mean them no harm. Because of this connection, I decided this is where I would start my research into ancestral ways that could support me and my family during the first 1000 days. I would look at different plant based practices.

The first practice I looked into was food. What did pregnant and postpartum women eat, what were the first foods given to babies and how could I incorporate an ancestral diet into my family's life? I started decolonising my postpartum and motherhood experience through the everyday and practical mode of cooking and eating. We had to do it three times a day anyway and I needed to find a way of connection that was practical and not an extra thing I had to do as a new mum. What we ate became about connection, gratitude and nourishment rather than weight loss or the stress to understand micro-nutrients to give my family what they needed. I literally had to go back to my gut- my intuition to guide my meals. What I gained was a daily connection to my ancestors, a new passion from growing my own food and a new collection of recipes that drew on new and familiar ingredients I had ancestral connections to. The whole process has been delicious and nourishing.

From food, I decided to explore weaving as I am a weaver and textile artist. I have always used my hands to create jewellery and other functional art pieces. Weaving is how I have connected to my kin and cultures across the oceans. I have gone and sat with my aunts and cousins to learn how to weave, I have studied their techniques, I have tried to grow my own traditional grasses. I always felt a great sense of connection, even from my lounge room while I weave, knowing so many before me had used the same techniques. Weaving, like so many other crafts has medicinal properties in the doing. The sense of meditative calm that happens reduces stress, lowers blood pressure and calms the mind. As a contemporary artist I have incorporated new colours and materials into my weaving, developing my own style that is informed by the past but has context in the present. As a mother I began making rattles and mobiles.

The other element of plants that I discovered was their medicine. Plants have been used during the first 1000 days including birthing for eternity. Their medicines are fundamental to the physical and spiritual wellbeing of mama and baby. There is so much that needs to be reclaimed in this space. Often where these practices are still intact are in "developing" countries where men have not taken over the reproductive healthcare of women. In these countries medicines are still part of the everyday tools of midwives and doulas.

All of these plant based practices strengthened my connection to my plant kin and my resolve to continue on the path that I am on. I have come to know the plants in my garden as friends and family and am grateful to them for all the medicines that they bring me and my family.

After exploring plant based practices I opened up my practice to be multi-artform. I realised the essential need for all arts and cultural practices to be part of our practice as mothers. For during the first 1000 days we are our babies' first teachers, their world, and by centring

our creative and cultural selves in this time we are providing a foundation that allows our babies to be connected to their pasts so that they can flourish in their future.

I have now taken these learnings and teachings into a creative project called Ngamumu which means For Mothers in the Kuku Yalanji language that my co-collaborator Merindi Schrieber hails from.

This project is about creating space through pop ups or community workshops that bring mamas and their babies together to learn more about the concept of the first 1000 days and how we can bring arts and cultural practices together to create resources for ourselves and our babies during this time.

The art and cultural practices we deliver are based on traditional ways, using contemporary materials. We want to create useful everyday tools for mamas to help support them to nurture their babies during this rapid time of change for both of them.

These activities include lullaby writing, connection to Country mobiles, Torres Strait Island toy weaving, Appliqueing motifs on clothing, doll making, native basket and rattle weaving and much more. Each of the activities target the babies' different developmental stages throughout the 1000 days. By empowering mamas through teaching creative skills we are supporting them to have a creative practice while also centring culture throughout the journey.

Our workshops are immersive experiences with food being central to the project. We cater each workshop with postpartum and lactation recipes that support the mamas wellbeing. The slow cooker is always on and the smell floats through the air when participants arrive. The lighting and music is calming and warm and the space is set up with different developmental play area for the babies to roam freely so that the mothers can participate in the activities.

Different to many other mums and bubs groups we recognise that babies in the past have learnt and participated in community through observing and doing. Women of the tribe or village would work together each day to produce food, artefacts or the necessary items for their families while their babes were present, crawling, climbing, observing, mimicking and helping. Work and family were not separate- in order for babies to grow and become active citizens of their community they had to be part of the everyday fabric of the community. Culture was an everyday part of being. Our workshops have been curated in this way so that babies are present, they are part of the workshop but not central. They play, help their mamas or nap in the middle of it all! We know that all the while they are learning, listening to the stories being told and taking in the sense of community, calm and nourishment that the space provides for their mamas.

This project has been the extension of my learnings and the dream of what I wanted and needed during my own experience as a mama. I, along with Merindi and the other artists we work with, have turned it into a service to others who I knew must be feeling a similar way. It is a reclamation of the old ways and a celebration of what we have access to and who we are today. I hope it is the start of the conversations at home, the call for participants to find out more about their own mobs and draw from their creative and cultural practices to provide belonging and grounding for them and their family.

Having my children has made my kinship ties stronger now than they ever have been. I feel the desire and responsibility to connect my children to their kinship circles. Through my arts and cultural practice I have reclaimed old ways, recipes and ceremonies while also creating new traditions and creative practices for my family. Even through this pandemic that keeps me away from my lands and family, I know the connection I have to my kin is so powerful it connects me through time and place.