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From mothers to matriarchs

Sergio A. Silverio with a personal take on modern constructions of ancient family values. Online exclusive.



Growing up as the son and only child of an Italian mother and a Portuguese father, one thing was always made clear to me: that I should 'know my roots'. I was expected to have *known* my roots even before I knew what *roots* were exactly; before I could even spell it. The sense of identity was strong in my family; still is, perhaps stronger still since the Brexit vote of 2016.

Identity has also become increasingly important in my work on gender. It's multifaceted, layered, a composite patchwork coat that we wear to perform in and to the world. It's linked to the setting in

which we find ourselves, and to our changing psychological state. When overlaid on gender, identity has the power to allow the fearless soldier to offer their spare time to charity work; or the cut-throat barrister to return home and care for their ailing parent; or the toughest and most domineering of surgeons to demonstrate nothing but warmth and comfort to a child in their care.

One defining trait of my family identity has been the presence of many wonderful, intriguing, and strong women who have migrated, raised and, most importantly, led

their families from their roots on the continent, to our various branches in the UK and beyond. One thing has remained constant: it is the women who were and still are the 'true' leaders, the problem solvers, the arbitrators, and the ones who always have the last word. They are more than just our mothers, they are our matriarchs.

Families without borders

To paint an accurate enough picture of how my Portuguese and Italian sides came to live in the UK I have to skip back a few generations on either side.

It was my father's parents who first moved here as immigrants from Portugal in the 1970s, to escape the country's civil unrest (which culminated in the Carnation Revolution on 25 April 1974 bringing down the quasi-fascist 'Estado Novo' dictatorship four years after the death of the 'New State's' long-time leader, António de Oliveira Salazar). They were in search of a 'better life' – at least one that did not rely on the seasons being kind to the crop fields in order for there to be enough food on the table. And so my father first came to this country as a child in 1976 in the middle of Britain's heatwave, finding it similar in climate to his native land (though he and his siblings were somewhat ill prepared for the harsh winter that then followed).

My mother's side is more complicated. Whilst she was born here, her mother was born close to Rome in Italy making my mother, technically, a first-generation Britain-born, and thus me a second-generation Britain-born baby. My mother's father was also born here to an Italian father and an Italian mother who had spent her early life between Italy and France, but who had a large proportion of her Italian relatives residing in Scotland. If families were found in sweet shops, mine would definitely be in the pick 'n' mix aisle.

Further muddying the waters of my familial gene pool was a need to keep ethnicity relatively quiet during the interwar period. This was especially so during the Second World War when Italy – under Benito Mussolini's dictatorship – was fighting with the Axis powers against Britain. 'British-Italians' were considered *personæ non gratae*, regardless of their efforts to fight against their Fascist-led homeland.

Nonetheless, as most immigrants do, both sides of my family made their homes in the capital. My maternal relatives settled in the East End of London, running nightclubs 'up West' (they came to know a young Shirley Bassey and became fast friends with Tommy Cooper). These interactions gifted a solid Cockney twang to most of my family members who were either born here or who came young enough to adopt it. The older members of my family maintain the rounded and dulcet tones of the Italian accent, or the softened and indolent lilt of the Portuguese accent. Having grown up in the Home Counties, I myself maintain a tendency to speak in meandering monologues and use the clipped vowel structure of RP.

Being the 'immigrant'

It's strange to identify with being an immigrant when you are talking about the country in which you were born, and where you live. But when one's roots of origin are so far displaced, it is hard to otherwise assimilate oneself. Immigration debates have been raging for as long as I can remember, and, having grown up with the 'know your roots' mantra, I always have pondered my affiliation. Am I just White British? Or a foreigner? A (British)-foreigner in Britain, perhaps? Or a non-migrated immigrant? Certainly Britain-born, but not actually *British* by blood?

I've settled on 'Britain-born, White European'. It ticks all the right boxes, and by

'right' I don't mean legally or politically, nor do I regard it as having the best of both (or in my case, all three) worlds. It is factually correct: my family heritage is White European from Italian and Portuguese bloodlines (though I am sure a DNA ethnicity test would also be hugely illuminating), and I was born in Britain.

Clear-cut and to the point, right? Wrong! Our psychological identities are far more complicated and unfortunately often fail to give in to a well-constructed and logical argument, no matter how often it is tabled. I believe we often fail to realise how our identities can so powerfully shape our experiences. From early on I remember being one of the most 'ethnically diverse' students in my schools in the Home Counties – most of my friends parents were from the same towns, not different countries! And in remembering attending school, I recall being uncomfortable talking so openly about *my* religion. Religion was for church, for Sundays. Mum would put the pasta sauce on to cook in the morning, and we would attend 11 o'clock mass, greeting and eventually saying farewell to the entire local Italian community with a kiss on each cheek. That process could take anything up to an hour, but we always made sure we were home for lunch at 2 o'clock sharp.

I also recollect learning quite early on that in Portugal it was customary to adopt both family names after marriage, which has enabled generations of Iberians to bestow multiple hereditary names onto their children; in Italy, women retained their birth surnames after marriage. I learnt this because my dad made the conscious decision to 'put a stop to that' with me, thus gifting me a first, middle and last name. This did cause some confusion as to why teachers would say goodbye to us in July as 'Miss Jones' and come back in September as 'Mrs Smith', and also as to why my mother and her sister had adopted their

husbands' surnames. They were Italian, why did they not keep their own? Well, as with many immigrant families, in trying to integrate (and to conform to British legal paperwork), they adopted the British way of marrying, replacing their maiden name with their respective husbands' surnames.

I suppose in recounting these anecdotes I'm trying to explain that in the life of a so-called 'non-migrated immigrant' there are cultural practices, certain behaviours and even ways of speaking that can make one feel almost entirely disconnected from the people with whom one was born and raised in parallel. I can only begin to imagine how the members of my family and thousands of other members of other families must feel after having to physically leave their homeland where their practices are the norm and move to a country with a completely different culture and custom system.

I feel I've ended up with a happily knitted together patchwork of cultural identity. I attempt to draw on the best from all three countries: the courteousness of the British, the contemplativeness of the Portuguese and the zealous nature of the Italians. In doing so, it is probably also true that the less positive qualities of all three come through, such as British pedantry, Portuguese cynicism and Italian bluntness. However, I have not migrated to be here and so my psychological identity has grown organically, binding together these aspects. Those who do 'up sticks' are at far greater risk of their cultural identities being fragmented, dislodged and eroded in new places. It's a sacrifice that enables them to better integrate and assimilate – but at what cost? The psychological strain of acculturation has often been compared to that of bereavement and grieving, and so this is not an insignificant side-effect of migrating.

Enter the matriarchs

Usually, in early years, our environment is crafted and shaped by guardians or parents. In my case, many of our family customs and traditions were transplanted from the 'Old Country' to Britain. Large family Christmases spanned from Christmas Eve right through to the day after Boxing Day, sitting at a table of sometimes upwards of 30 people, with all the men down one side of it and all the women down the other. Every September a man would deliver a lorry full of grapes so the older men in the family could make the next year's wine. And there was always some form of biscuit, or meatball or pasta being made by a long line of the family's women... always so concerned about the last time you ate. Immigrant women seemed to me to show a doggedness for a sense of order and respect for old-fashioned values, whilst often being the ice-breakers to neighbours, teachers and those who became friends.

Family matriarchs would always instil the rule that we should be polite and quietly grateful for our new home, no matter how far away it was from the 'Old Country'. I was expected to both remember and revere my 'blood countries', even though I had never lived there, whilst also being grateful for the country in which I was born for fear that one day it might be that we were no longer welcome to stay. The identity of a non-migrated immigrant was and continues to be, a muddle.

In being polite and accepting of British customs, one aspect my family particularly took to was that of tea drinking. Having grown up in households full of women, every aunt, cousin, family friend, aunt-who-is-not-really-an-aunt and, of course, my mother adopted tea drinking as a normal way of life. If you were to ask for a tea in Portugal or Italy the response you would usually receive is: 'Why? Are you ill?' But tea drinking was

British, and we mix of Britain-borns and non-Britain-borns wanted to make sure we could blend in, just as immigrant families blend in to the multicultural scene we now find in Britain. Whether it be pouring your favourite blend into a cup for a neighbour, making one of their country's delicacies for the school bake sale, stocking up an elderly neighbour's freezer whilst they are unwell, or becoming the next line of teachers, medical professionals, engineers, MPs or CEOs... immigrants, and in my experience particularly the women, manage to effortlessly knit these old family values from their homelands together with their new setting.

Guardians of time-honoured traditions

Why should women be at the forefront of blending cultural boundaries? To take a leaf from psycho-anthropological studies of women and gender, it was thought that women were both the givers of life and presided over death. This bequeathed them a mystique and a power that men did not have, were afraid of, and wanted. As the more dominant sex, men then set about to oppress women, whilst instead becoming the shamans, witch doctors and medicine men. In doing so, men maintained control of the pathway to the afterlife and women became (to use a phrase made famous by Simone de Beauvoir) *'The Second Sex'*.

Gender identity was an integral part of this transition of power. Men adopted powerful characteristics linking them to the gods, whilst women took to raising the family and bringing new lives into the world and to the home. Having had many hundreds of years pass, men and women continued along these trajectories with men becoming 'fathers of the land', battling for more space for their kin and clan; whilst women became the masters of the 'homelands'. We see a modern version played out even to this day, whereby men are more likely to work away

and women are more likely to be the primary carer or caregiver for the family's children.

Of course, times have changed dramatically, and one's sex no longer controls the range of one's travel outside the home. But the maternal figure perhaps continues to be the one that maintains the old, homeland family values in the new spaces to which families migrate. It's certainly my opinion that the mother-matriarchs were and remain the true source of cultural leadership in any country or setting.

How they maintain this role is an aspect of their psychological make-up which has long fascinated me. In my academic work my stance on gender roles is that one's gender identity may not match one's biological sex and that gender is performed in accordance with context, environment, and people. I see gender identity as a state and not a trait characteristic: it's one that can adapt and change, augment and alter, wax and wane over the lifecourse. We have the opportunity to react to social cues and exhibit 'appropriate' and 'acceptable' versions of our gender identity in any given context. Could it be that females are not only better at adapting their gender identity in line with context and environment, but are more advanced and skilled at it, as well as actually doing it more often? As ever, more research is needed, but for me the image of the Italian mother-matriarch simultaneously placing an espresso coffee pot on the stove and flicking the kettle on for a cup of tea is one that resonates.

Intra-cultural leadership

My personal experience and reading of the literature has convinced me that matriarchal and maternal figures are integral to the acculturation process that any immigrant goes through when finding a new country to call home. Even in multi-cultural societies

such Britain, it is common to see how jarring some cultural practices or rules are to a British way of life. We see this played out in the media almost daily. Migration indubitably affects the psychological fabric of one's identity; even people like me, who have been raised in one cultural setting, can adopt practices from previous generations that are viewed as alien by those we've grown up with.

So for mental health, social wellbeing, and a better psychology of resilience to migration I table the idea that it is not a question of *intercultural* tolerance we require, but of *intracultural* leadership. Who better to safely lead and deliver families to new homes than the mothers and matriarchs who have done so for centuries before us?

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